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THE BRONTË SISTERS

by

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'France Herself Again.'

Translated from the French by

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CENTRAL MISSOURI
STATE COLLEGE
Warrensburg

LONDON: JONATHAN CAPE LTD.

FIRST PUBLISHED IN MCMXXVII
MADE & PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
BY BUTLER & TANNER LTD
FROME AND
LONDON

PR4168
.052

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The French original of this volume was published in 1910. The welcome it received at the time from the British and American press was more than encouraging, and an English translation was planned immediately. It is useless to relate the circumstances which deferred this work so long, and in which the present translator was in no way concerned.

In spite of the delay, it has seemed advisable to translate *Les Soeurs Brontë* practically as it originally appeared. The chief reason is that the interest of this book was, and has remained, pre-eminently human. On the other hand, the only addition of great importance to the biography of the Brontës since its publication has been the four famous letters from Charlotte to M. Héger. I thought it fairer to the former to leave my chapter on the Brussels episode as it was, giving the Letters, and discussing them, in the Appendix.

I felt half inclined to devote another appendix to Miss Law's strong presentment of the theory ascribing to Branwell the authorship of *Wuthering Heights*. On second thoughts I refrained from indulging in a critical debate not in the tone of the volume, and which had better be reserved for another occasion.

This translation is what the original aimed at being: frankly and simply a literary biography. I hope it will please readers for the same reasons which made Andrew Lang, in his *History of English Literature*, speak of it so kindly.

E. D.

INTRODUCTION

Among the most celebrated English writers are the Brontë sisters. Between the years 1847 and 1860 Charlotte, the eldest, enjoyed extraordinary popularity; and in the past twenty-five or thirty years – thanks partly to a few decisive pages written by Swinburne – she and Emily and their youngest sister Anne have joined the ranks of the immortals. It is possible that in the next generation or two their names will be mentioned with diminished enthusiasm, but they will surely live in the memory not only of English people but of educated people everywhere.

These two glorious moments in the career of the Brontës were marked in France: the first by translations of their works following closely upon the appearance of the originals, and by critical articles by such men as Eugène Forcade and Emile Montégut; the second by a new focusing of attention upon them with entirely new critical estimates. Madame Darmesteter's articles[1] in the *Revue de Paris* (December, 1899, and January, 1900) should be noted, as well as M. de Wyzewa's translation of *Wuthering Heights* (published under the title of *L'Amant*); and finally, because of the author's popularity, a few harmonious but inexact pages written by M. Maeterlinck.[2]

It is surprising that the present volume should have been the first to appear in France on the subject of these remarkable women. For the past thirty years English literature has been studied in France

[1] She had already written a monograph on Emily Brontë. *Eminent Women Series*, London, 1883.

[2] *Wisdom and Destiny*, pp. 264–282.

by a not inconsiderable number of young writers, some of whom are excellent, and the many English books written about the Brontës as well as the powerful interest, or better, the profound human sympathy which they arouse, should have tempted some mind more interested in literature than in learning.

I will venture to say that this work was not difficult. The Brontë sisters died young and wrote little; but, on the other hand, though their lives present few problems, they have been endlessly written about and, by singular good fortune, the greater part of these innumerable studies in detail, mostly useful biographical contributions, have found an adequate background in a book, which is already old – and have also been classified and summed up in another volume of more recent appearance which may be regarded as definitive.

In 1857, two years after Charlotte's death, her *Life* was published by her friend, Mrs. Gaskell. This is one of the five or six books regarded as the masterpieces of English biography.[1] The English are often poor biographers: at the same time sincere and timid,[2] arraying facts in a confused manner and afraid of losing anything, excellent psychologists, clear-sighted moralists, but unskilful in assembling the features that end by making a finished portrait.

Mrs. Gaskell was a novelist of delicate talent with

[1] The others are Southey's *Nelson*, Lockhart's *Walter Scott*, Moore's *Byron*, Stanley's *Thomas Arnold*, and for many readers honest Boswell's *Johnson*, though it is not, properly speaking, a biography.

[2] See the quiet suppression by Bishop Wordsworth of his uncle's romance with a French girl, revealed by my friend Emile Legouis in his book, *William Wordsworth and Annette Vallon* (Dent, London, 1922).

whom Charlotte Brontë was frequently associated during the last three or four years of her life. The proposal that she should write the life of her friend was a natural one. She acquitted herself of this task with less skill than she possessed as a novelist, but with simplicity, sincerity and, in certain parts, with admirable courage. No one can write about Charlotte Brontë without having this book constantly open on his desk; yet it is not perfect.

Written as it was scarcely two years after Miss Brontë's death, it could not but be more or less incomplete. In writing the book, Mrs. Gaskell depended above all upon Charlotte's voluminous correspondence with her friend Ellen Nussey: she knew nothing of the numerous documents published later, some of which – like the letters of Branwell Brontë to an Engineer, Grundy – were of considerable interest; nor did she know anything of the gossip concerning Charlotte's sojourn in Brussels. Moreover, the enormous mass of five hundred letters which she was constantly studying demoralized her more than once; she became confused, hesitated to sacrifice anything and sometimes uselessly lengthened her narrative. Charlotte Brontë's father was obliged to correct her more than once in cases where she had preferred the testimony of ordinary country women to his own. She has a tendency to darken her picture, and to project the Charlotte whom she had known into the young girl whose image she had to evoke. Even when she speaks from her own experience one must analyse her impression for her. But, such as it is, her book has a value which cannot be denied, and it is only necessary to complete or discuss it.

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This is what Mr. Clement Shorter has done in his work, *Charlotte Brontë and Her Sisters*. This author devoted the leisure of an active career to collecting and arranging the new material concerning the Brontës which a half-century of ardent or curious research has dispersed in every direction. His two enormous volumes, full of vast and peaceful learning, are a real library. The reproach which must be made to Mr. Shorter is that, with such accurate and widespread knowledge, he remains not so much a critic as a collector. The relation between the works of the Brontës and their intimate life does not interest him, and even details of great importance in their lives leave him indifferent if they are not immediately tangible. For instance, he lays aside, without trying to draw any conclusion from it, the testimony of a friend of Charlotte's which might show that she had a warm feeling for her Brussels professor. Had the lives of the Brontë sisters presented many such delicate points, Mr. Shorter would certainly not have been the man to write about them. As it only required diligence and care, his *Charlotte Brontë and Her Sisters* remains a book of the first order.

In addition to these two works, there was room for psychological and literary interpretations. In her introductions to the first six volumes of the Haworth Edition,[1] Mrs. Humphry Ward judges her predecessor from the standpoint of a critic and novelist, but nearly always as a woman who places life itself above her craft. It is infinitely to be regretted that the idea did not occur to her to rewrite the work of Mrs. Gaskell, adding her own impressions as an excellent reader.

[1] The seventh is presented by Mr. Shorter.

The only literary biography of Charlotte Brontë and her sisters which has hitherto been written is a little book by Mr. Augustine Birrell – the well-known critic and politician – which appears in the series known as 'Great Writers.' Mr. Birrell is a charming writer, deliciously gay, spontaneous, natural. Only he is a bit too witty, and his gaiety turns too easily into playfulness. He adores literature, poetry, all beautiful things, but he has a very decided idea that all this must be kept in its place, and not too large a place; and even when he is full of admiration for a writer's works, he has a tendency to speak of the writer himself without respect. This half smile is not always seasonable. Mr. Birrell has ended by composing an amusing biography, but I do not believe that this result was what the truth, or even his reader, required of him.

It will readily be seen what the present writer has attempted to do. In a biography such as this, in which everything is at once simple and complicated – simple, if one is not curious about psychological subtleties, but complicated, even unsolvable, if one wishes to get behind the documents – I believe art more capable of approaching the truth than discussions. I fear that anyone who should introduce the mechanism of judicial procedure into the life of Charlotte Brontë (except in one or two points like the Héger question), would only succeed in making it seem unreal without convincing the reader. What is called historical verity is a vanishing point and nothing more. Whether the documents are numerous or scarce the difficulty is the same, and no human life can be reconstructed. Those who doubt this have only to attempt the remaking of their own history at

some distant critical moment. It has been said that Charlotte and her sisters had simple natures. This is an error. They had simple lives, little varied, always troubled in about the same ways, but their natures were not simple. I have therefore chosen to influence the reader as he would be by the documents themselves, and as much as possible by appearances, instead of drawing up a more profound plan and bending all the available material to its use. This means sacrificing any air of profundity on the writer's part; but it is no sacrifice, since it means guaranteeing to the reader that he will almost surely see further with his own eyes than through the magnifying glasses of the critic.

I hope I may be permitted to add that I have written this book with continuous pleasure. The Brontë sisters are old acquaintances of mine, even, in spite of their faults, my friends, and I have not written of them with indifference. Perhaps they will not be alone in appreciating this attitude on my part.

CHAPTER I

★

To French people the North of England means a thickly populated and sombre region where cities with prosaic names elbow one another confusedly. Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Bradford, Blackburn, Preston generally suggest much noise, much smoke, money, misery and ugliness, and hardly anything else.

But mention the simple words 'The North' to an Englishman and his imagination immediately shows him, not cities, but a mountainous country where moors and lakes lie in solitude amid profound silence, and wide horizons where the wind has free play. He seems to breathe rough but healthful air, and to hear language spoken with Dorian accents by a race frank and independent, timeworn and hard and heavy as the stones of its own soil, but judicious and even intelligent; he will have the impression of a political and religious atmosphere charged with Radicalism, and he will smile at traditions provincial in character but honest, cordial and jealously preserved. Even if he is himself an uprooted Northerner naturalized in London, or is lazily leading the easy life of the South, he always feels that the real stock of his race has remained in the vivifying cold of the North.

The western part of Yorkshire has always been known by its Saxon name of West Riding (the western third). Ten or twelve miles from Bradford, almost on the borders of Lancashire, lies the town of Keighley, a manufacturing centre of some importance. It is an ugly town, built of yellow brick or the iron-grey stone which abounds in that region. Unlike most northern towns which keep within their own limits, Keighley sprawls over the surrounding

country. The narrow valley, through which the little Haworth railroad follows as well as it can a shabby river, is blocked at frequent intervals by factories, and ribbed with yellow or grey rectangular streets.

As the traveller approaches Haworth a few steeply sloping meadows appear, surrounded by crenellated dikes, but as he leaves the small railway station the view is gloomy, with not even a sight of the horizon. A cinder pathway climbs a vacant lot till it reaches a rough narrow street paved with large flagstones and lined with frowning stone houses. Between these inhospitable walls one climbs reluctantly to an inn called the Black Bull, which faces a church, and at the farther end of a graveyard positively choked with tombstones stands the parsonage with its little garden. In this house lived Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë, three poor girls made famous by their dreams which they took the trouble to write down – poor souls bruised by their short lives, and driven back within themselves.

The parsonage, the inn, the repellent street look new and seem to have stored up no memories of the past; nevertheless, they are exactly as they were a hundred years ago. Their iron-like stone does not change, it gives nothing and receives nothing. In no other part of the world could one find memories so lugubriously imprisoned. Luckily the parsonage is the last house in the village. If we pass through an iron turnstile, and across two or three dry treeless meadows that slant upward toward quarries, with finally another turnstile, we suddenly find ourselves in the moors. The village has vanished, and nothing can be seen but the church steeple rising above the

ree-tops in the graveyard. The valley by which we ame is also invisible; look where we may, we see nly the outlines of the high hills vaulting into the lear sky; villages appear here and there, far and in-ccessible upon abrupt declivities; a fresh breeze ings in one's ears; sunny hollows are flowery with hyme and heather among fragile ferns; a great eace reigns over everything; our eyes wander freely ver the vast open sky, with horizons at once simple nd intelligible and yet full of thought; we are con-scious of force, of independence and great spiritual clarity. Without any doubt the native land of the Brontë sisters was not sad Haworth, but these moors.

CHAPTER TWO

*

The Reverend Patrick Brontë was an Irishman from the County of Down. In his own country his name was Prunty or O'Prunty, and he had changed it, like other compatriots of his, on settling in England. The son of humble parents saddled with a large family, he had worked perseveringly under hard conditions and perhaps with growing antipathy and resentment for poor Erin, which he must have regarded as a cruel stepmother. At first a weaver, then schoolmaster, then tutor in a parson's family, he finally left Ireland irrevocably, glad to put the sea between himself and his first twenty-five years of life.[1] He entered St. John's College at Cambridge, remained there four years, and achieved at length his Anglican ordination and a mediocre benefice, being appointed curate of Wethersfield in Essex. After a brief and cruel love affair, which I should like to have the time to relate, he migrated to the North, going from Wellington to Dewsbury and thence to Hartshead, where he was married. At this time he was thirty-five years old, and his wife, Maria Branwell, was twenty-nine. She was a native of Cornwall, a woman of gentle and loving nature, and in delicate health. She had six children in eight years. The two elder ones, Maria and Elizabeth, were born in Hartshead; the four others, Charlotte (1816), Patrick Branwell (1817), Emily (1818), and Anne (1820) at Thornton, near Bradford, whither their father had been transferred in 1816.

There was nothing in Mr. Brontë of the satisfied self-made parvenu. In spite of his Protestantism he

[1] It must not be supposed, however, that he was heartless. All his life he sent money to his family.

was a true Celt, ardent yet concentrated, whose stored-up energy found a vent in literature. He wrote descriptive and religious poems which he printed at his own expense, but which are easy to read and hold an honourable rank in the immense literary output of country clergymen. It has been said that he was violent, and subject to fits of anger which made people tremble. According to an old woman, questioned by Mrs. Gaskell, he broke the furniture, burned it, or discharged a score of pistol shots in his garden at invisible enemies. These are only old wives' tales. Mr. Brontë was a silent and dreamy hypochondriac, peacefully egoistic, seldom going out of the house, and wearing out his life in his study.

In 1820 he was appointed rector of Haworth, a little village, encumbered by a number of Baptists and Methodists, but which brought him in, nevertheless, about one hundred and seventy pounds a year. The harsh climate of this region did not agree with Mrs. Brontë, who had been brought up in the mild humidity of the south-west. She shut herself up in the parsonage and was not long in taking to her bed. There she languished uncomplainingly for more than a year. She would ask to be raised up in bed that she might watch the woman who took care of her while she cleaned the fireplace, 'because she did it like Cornwall people.' She died in the autumn of 1821 when the eldest of her little daughters was eight years old and Anne was only beginning to walk.

The unanimous testimony of the few people who frequented the Brontë home at this time is that these little children were quite unlike others of their age. Their mother never left her bed, and they were rarely

allowed to enter her room. Mr. Brontë had already acquired the habit of eating alone most of the time at any hour he chose, and stayed constantly in his library; and the children were nearly always by themselves in a small room which was called their 'study,' and where, in fact, as soon as they had learned their letters, they passed entire days in reading. From time to time they went walking on the moors, all six of them, holding one another by the hand. They never had any friends or companions except during the short time spent in boarding-school. Scarcely anybody came to the parsonage, and Mr. Brontë, beyond the duties of his ministry which he fulfilled with exactitude, seeing his parishioners as much as possible, cultivated no social relations except those with his fellow-clergymen.

Mr. Brontë was not hard, not even severe with his children. He heard their lessons, himself, and must have been from the beginning proud of their intelligence. Mrs. Gaskell has said that he reared with Spartan rigour these young creatures who had inherited the frail health of their mother. He is said to have fed them only on vegetables, and to have exposed them to all sorts of weather without regard to consequences. Several letters published later, however,[1] prove that Mrs. Gaskell misrepresented Mr. Brontë's character, and show that he realized only too well that he was dealing with delicate children. A year after his wife's death he wrote to the woman he had formerly loved, at Wethersfield, and whom only the unfeeling perfidy of her parents had prevented his marrying, and asked her to come and take care of his six motherless children. But nothing

[1] See *Manchester Guardian*, February 2, 1910.

came of this effort. He wrote then to one of his sisters-in-law at Penzance, Miss Elizabeth Branwell, who was older than his wife, and who agreed to come. She was a little old spinster who wore a silk gown, a large bonnet trimmed with ruching, and carried a gold snuff-box. She was nearer fifty than forty years old, and her sober provincial life led her to accept without hesitation the devoted service proposed to her. She conceived at first sight an outspoken antipathy for Yorkshire and everything northern, climate, people and things. The contrast between her own pretty, sociable and decent town and the rough village to which she had come was too evident, and she passed her life in calling attention to the fact. Her influence on the children was but slight. She too preferred to take her meals in her own room, and only gave herself the trouble to see that the little girls knew how to use their fingers: they all became skilful in the art of embroidery.

There would have been little warmth of heart in Mr. Brontë's stone house had it not been for the presence of Tabitha, the honest native maid-servant whom they called Tabby, and who infused into the childhood of the young Brontës a hearty affection, crude but faithful. It was in her kitchen that they knew the joys of being spoiled and scolded, stuffed with good things, and obeyed. Her name, her figure of an old mountain woman, and her dialect with its recurrent sound of *a*, appear often in Charlotte's works.

It was in 1823, the year in which Miss Branwell came to Haworth, that a neighbouring clergyman, the Reverend Carus Wilson, had founded at Cowan Bridge a boarding-school for the daughters of poor

clergymen. It was a most inexpensive school, where pupils were lodged, fed and taught for about fourteen pounds a year. Its cheapness, its proximity to the parsonage, and perhaps the opinions of its founder – a man of unbending mind who believed in human equality – induced Mr. Brontë to part for a while with his two elder daughters. Maria and Elizabeth were entered at Cowan Bridge in July, 1824, and the experiment seeming successful, Charlotte and Emily joined their sisters there early in September. Cowan Bridge is the school described at length under the name of Lowood in Charlotte's first published novel, *Jane Eyre*. There is no doubt as to the nature of the impression the school made upon her. Her description of Lowood is far from evoking that of Dotheboys Hall, for the realism of Charlotte Brontë, when it is sombre, is never lightened by the gaiety of a Dickens. These terrible chapters of *Jane Eyre* remind the reader more of the *Memories of the House of Death*, and yet they have none of the pitiful submission, the resigned courage, or the profound Christian tenderness which sweeten the atmosphere of Dostoiewsky's prison. The charm of the little martyr, Helen Burns, and the nobility of Miss Temple are not there for any softening effect, but to form a contrast.[1]

In the spring of 1825 an epidemic of what physicians then called so expressively a low fever broke

[1] Efforts have been made to discover if Cowan Bridge was really the cold, unhealthful greenhouse, delivered over to a fury and governed by a Tartuffe, described in *Jane Eyre*. Probably not. Charlotte's novels have a strong tendency to gloom, and her imagination alters facts without the least regard as to what may be said of the result. This is one of our reasons for reproaching her with lack of delicacy, but it must be added that this reproach would have ex-

out in the school. None of the Brontë children was attacked, but the weak health of Maria suddenly developed into rapid consumption. Mr. Brontë being informed hurried to Cowan Bridge and took his daughter home in the coach. It was too late. A few days later the child died. She had scarcely been buried when the same symptoms were observed in Elizabeth. She was immediately sent home to Haworth, but these sickly children had no power of resistance, and in less than a month the little girl joined her mother and her sister under the flagstones of the church.

Charlotte and Emily only returned to Cowan Bridge for a few weeks. Their father ordered them home before Christmas, and life at the parsonage went on as usual.

tremely astonished her. She whose ideas were so removed from art for art's sake, who believed that she consulted her conscience every time she committed a word to paper, and who, besides, so often and so artlessly made copy of her own experiences in her novels, had no scruple in altering or deforming real people and events.

CHAPTER THREE

*

Four peaceful years followed. The children were well, and began to live their solitary life with the intensity which always characterized it. Anne was now only five years old and did not count for much, but Emily was nine, Branwell ten, and Charlotte eleven, and they were all prodigiously intelligent. It is not at all a paradox to say that numbers of men attain to all the intellectual and moral perfection of which they are capable at about their tenth year, and after that rapidly retrograde. The power with which the civilized world takes possession at this moment of the faculties of children, added to their fatal instinct for imitation, never more imperious than at this age, results in forcing upon them artificial ways of seeing and feeling which only a few of the strongest can resist. The others forget their real selves in a short time, and only retain a memory, confused and often altered by formulæ, of a delicious spontaneity in which the soul escaped from all that was oppressive to lose itself in a thousand ravishing sensations. It is in the depth of these memories that the mature man sadly endeavours to rediscover the secret of his lost happiness. Sometimes his analysis results in recreating a little truth or beauty; as for happiness, it is a mirage, and only those find it who accept the divine revelation counselling them to turn their backs upon it instead of consuming themselves in its search.

Children are marvellous artists, psychologists and even philosophers.

If we reflect upon the intuitive power revealed in a book like *Wuthering Heights*, written by Emily Brontë at the age of twenty-four, we can form some idea of the natural capacity of her brain. Also, when

we read what Charlotte's biographers say of her extraordinary eyes when she was thirty years old, eyes of an indefinable colour, large and serene, and shining as if a lamp had been lighted behind them, we wonder what they must have been in her girlhood.

As the children of a poet father, the Brontës had one unusual piece of good fortune. Living side by side with a man who had published his works and who wrote poems daily, gave them an instinctive familiarity with books instead of the shyness or even fear in the presence of print which is almost always the rule at that age. Patrick Branwell, like his sisters, read incessantly, and the whole young community were not only persuaded that some day they would become writers but prepared themselves for a literary career by all sorts of efforts. Mr. Brontë, whether on principle or from motives of strict economy, never permitted any books of what is called child-literature to enter the house. Picture books and nursery tales, however superior they might be in England, were never allowed to spoil the strong, healthy appetites of the young Brontës for their classics. They read the Bible, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Addison, the eighteenth-century poets, Walter Scott, parts of Shakespeare, ancient and contemporary history with the passion felt for such works as long as one has not tasted those insipidities which are the coloured bonbons of the mind. With the exception of a few books of sermons it is probable that they read the same things as their father did. A note which Charlotte wrote two years after her return from Cowan Bridge shows us the nature of the periodicals that came to the parsonage. These were two or three substantial English provin-

cial journals and *Blackwood's Magazine*, an excellent review which Mr. Brontë was too poor to buy but which was loaned by a neighbouring physician. Not only does Charlotte write quite naturally, 'We receive the *Leeds Intelligencer*, we read *Blackwood's*,' but she describes the character of all these publications which, fortunately, were both Whig and Tory. Mr. Brontë tells how he talked politics with Maria, his eldest daughter, when she was ten years old, as he would talk with a grown man. The following extract from one of Charlotte's early manuscripts will show the reader how she thought and wrote in 1829. She makes excuses to herself for having ceased work on some fiction she was engaged upon because politics had become far too interesting:

'Parliament was opened, and the great Catholic question was brought forward, and the Duke's measures were disclosed, and all was slander, violence, party spirit and confusion. Oh, those six months, from the time of the King's Speech to the end! Nobody could write, think, or speak on any subject but the Catholic question, and the Duke of Wellington, and Mr. Peel. I remember the day when the *Intelligence Extraordinary* came with Mr. Peel's speech in it, containing the terms on which the Catholics were to be let in! With what eagerness papa tore off the cover, and how we all gathered round him, and with what breathless anxiety we listened, as one by one they were disclosed, and explained, and argued upon so ably, and so well! and then when it was all out, how aunt said that she thought it was excellent, and that the Catholics could do no harm with such good security! I remember

also the doubts as to whether it would pass the House of Lords, and the prophecies that it would not; and when the paper came which was to decide the question, the anxiety was almost dreadful with which we listened to the whole affair: the opening of the doors; the hush; the royal dukes in their robes, and the great Duke in green sash and waistcoat; the rising of all the peeresses when he rose; the reading of his speech – papa saying that his words were like precious gold – and lastly, the majority of one to four (*sic*) in favour of the Bill. But this is a digression,' etc., etc.

Extraordinary child! She was then a little more than thirteen years of age, and her 'digression,' mixed up as it is with what aunt and papa said, recalls Macaulay's admirable description of the opening of the trial of Warren Hastings. Her language is already formed: it is the admixture of firmness, ease and brilliance which were to characterize all she would write in the future.

In the enormous mass of manuscripts she produced during this period there is nothing that would show her as the little pedant one might be tempted to imagine. Alongside passages full of brilliance we find childish ones which strike us as discordant, but which, happily, she regarded as of importance, noting them without troubling herself about their contrast to the rest. Striking pictures appear here and there of domestic details and household scenes. We hear Emily sweeping the drawing-room carpet, we see Branwell in the kitchen leaning on his elbows before some cakes fresh from the oven. It is quite evident – and this is an important detail – that their writings

were only the transcription of such intensely enjoyable play that they could not resign themselves to lose the memory of it. When pens were heard scratching for hours in the 'children's study,' it meant that they had been having a glorious time.

Here is the introduction of a sort of drama entitled *The Islanders*:

'The play of the *Islanders* was formed in December, 1827, in the following manner: One night, about the time when the cold sleet and stormy fogs of November are succeeded by the snowstorms, and high, piercing night winds of confirmed winter, we were all sitting round the warm blazing kitchen fire, having just concluded a quarrel with Tabby concerning the propriety of lighting a candle, from which she came off victorious, no candle having been produced. A long pause succeeded, which was at last broken by Branwell saying, in a lazy manner, "I don't know what to do." This was echoed by Emily and Anne.

Tabby. Wha, ya may go t' bed.

Branwell. I'd rather do anything than that.

Charlotte. Why are you so glum to-night, Tabby? Oh, suppose we had each an island of our own.

Branwell. If we had I would choose the Isle of Man.

Charlotte. And I would choose the Isle of Wight.

Emily. The Isle of Arran for me.

Anne. And mine shall be Guernsey.

We then chose who should be chief men in our islands. Branwell chose John Bull, Astley Cooper and Leigh Hunt; Emily, Walter Scott, Mr. Lockhart, Johnny Lockhart; Anne, Michael Sadler, Lord

Bentinck, Sir Henry Halford. I chose the Duke of Wellington and two sons, Christopher North and Co., and Mr. Abernethy of *Blackwood's*. Here our conversation was interrupted by the, to us, dismal sound of the clock striking seven, and we were summoned off to bed.'

Branwell's choice struck the keynote. The little man, passionately fond of reading, places Leigh Hunt, then at the height of his career, on his island, but he must also have John Bull. These young geniuses were not prodigies, and it was not their fault if the atmosphere of their home was rather bookish.

Charlotte's contribution to the veritable library produced by the little Brontës at this time consists of twenty-three copy-books containing from sixty to a hundred pages covered with writing so microscopic that two hundred lines could be contained in one page of this book. She must have scribbled the whole day long. Emily's and Anne's copy-books have been destroyed, but there still remain several of Branwell's and he was as admirably gifted as his sisters.

Charlotte's catalogue consists of five or six novels, the series of *The Islanders*, a large number of stories in which her god, Wellington, the 'great duke,' fills the principal rôle, contemporary portraits, literary reviews, a satirical drama entitled *The Poetaster*, and finally, numerous poems, including 'a thing in fourteen lines,' which reminds one of the *ronds et barres* of young Blaise Pascal. All this was written in fifteen months.

It does not appear that Mr. Brontë was informed of what was going on in that small, narrow room on

the first floor of his house. Charlotte says somewhere that 'secret comedies' are the most amusing, and children feel with intensity that they alone can appreciate the wisdom of their own folly. They are never more truly themselves than when they are seen whispering together as night comes on.

CHAPTER FOUR

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EARLY in 1831, when Charlotte was fifteen, she was again sent to boarding-school. Her father foresaw the approach of the day when she would have to earn her living, and it was necessary to prepare her. He chose this time one of those little schools, so numerous in England, kept by one or two maiden ladies, half from choice, half necessity, in their own homes, and where there were seldom more than a dozen scholars.

Roe Head was a fine old house situated not far from the road leading from Leeds to Huddersfield, in a country composed of pasture land and lordly parks upon which the factories were slowly extending their leprous ugliness. Miss Wooler was forty years old, a round, easy-going woman, with gracious manners, who spoke well and had a charming voice. She had only seven scholars, and conducted her school like a private home. There were no stipulated hours for lessons. When the pupils knew them they went and recited them to the teacher.

Charlotte's arrival was an event. The cart stopped at the door, and there descended from it a strange little creature who appeared about ten years old, who was near-sighted and frightened, and dressed in an old-fashioned gown like those made fifteen years before for the ladies of Penzance. Miss Wooler examined the new arrival, and found that she did not know a word of grammar and very little geography. Her ignorance and her diminutive size were about to place her among the little girls when a storm of tears produced by this news decided Miss Wooler to leave her with the older girls – among whom she immediately made a friend, Ellen Nussey, to whom we owe all these details.

Having first amused the school, it was not long before Charlotte astonished it. It began to be seen that this ignorant girl was a well of knowledge. Not only did she know all the classic poems the pupils were studying, but she knew their origin and talked familiarly of their authors. In everything known as literature she was at home. A true and profound remark of hers upon Johnson, quoted by her friend, shows that her learning was only the nourishment of a thoughtful mind: through books, she could already judge men.

She drew with a rapidity and precision which her companions had never seen before. Drawing was one of her passions. As she was too near-sighted to join in the recreation games, she spent hours with her nose on an engraving, studying it line by line and discovering numberless things which she explained extremely well. One of her later notes shows us that she would have liked to know the history of art, and was impatient to see the works of genuine masters.

She was evidently popular at Roe Head. Though lacking any aptitude for sport she possessed another means for achieving success, and one which is highly prized in English schools: she could tell stories which kept her companions awake in their beds as long as she wished. It would seem that she already had a taste for terrifying tales, for one evening she told such a frightful story that one of the little girls began to shriek, and the schoolmistress came running to see what was the matter.

Two of the pupils at Roe Head, Ellen Nussey already mentioned and Mary Taylor, remained her lifelong friends. Judging by their letters – and Mary Taylor also wrote books – they were rather remark-

able women, capable of appreciating their schoolmate. Mary Taylor says that she kept all her life the habit one takes in contact with a superior mind, of referring mentally to Charlotte's judgment whenever she was struck or interested by anything.

Charlotte had made a sort of religion of her admiration for her sisters who had died, and often spoke of them to her friends. This was probably the only intimate confidence she gave them, for her letters though affectionate were for some time a trifle reserved, with that slight touch of formality which is a provincialism nowadays but was for a long time only a natural sign of self-respect. At this period, when Charlotte spoke to Ellen Nussey of her other friend and her sister she called them the Misses Taylor. The flame which impassions her novels smouldered deep in her soul, hidden under a triple armour of convention. She always had the air of a little Puritan, true daughter of a village minister in the north.

The region surrounding Roe Head taught many things to the future creator of *Shirley*. This verdant countryside could be read like a story-book, with its neglected country-seats in parks that had gradually been reclaimed by nature, its spinning and weaving-mills along all the rivers, and its passing bands of bold workmen whom Miss Wooler's pupils always met in their walks, who ogled them and called 'Eh, the beauty!' in tones that were more than familiar.

As there were no large mansions in the moors, Charlotte had never seen one. Had she happened to be born in a southern county, she would have grown up in the shadow of what was always called the 'Great House,' the hereditary home of the patron of the benefice. She would have had the daughters of

the Squire for friends – always with that slight nuance of patronage which would have seemed as natural to her as the air she breathed. She would have seen luxury without sharing it; she would not have been jealous because the atmosphere of this social *milieu* is healthy enough not to breed envy, but she would have thought about it, and have had small bourgeois ideas about London, the Court, levees and presentations. Prejudices and conventional expressions would have been natural to her, and instead of execrating Jane Austen she would inevitably have imitated her. Perhaps she would never have written at all; in any event, her novels would not have had the acrid vigour which is one of their charms.

The country mansions whose stories Miss Wooler told to her pupils when, in their long promenades they happened to pass their white façades with classical columns, were almost all deserted. Their proprietors having become too poor to keep them up, only made furtive visits there. Charlotte, therefore, had the luck to imagine aristocracy rather than see it.

Her nature, sincere but romantic, had need of dreams, and it is possible that her powerful gift for realism might have prevented her writing if all her creations had first appeared to her as actualities.

All the industrial framework of *Shirley* is also derived from her memories of Roe Head. The well-dressed and well-fed weavers, whose convenient little houses were everywhere to be seen, standing between a great heap of coal and a brewing barrel, were the sons of the rioters of 1812. Miss Wooler remembered having heard, night after night, when work was scarce and every day some new mechanical invention diminished the workmen's chances, the terrify-

ing passage of thousands of volunteers drilling for soldiers in order to march on London and wrench from Parliament the reforms which pity alone did not inspire them to bring about. She had witnessed the attack on the manufactory of Cartwright – whom Charlotte was to personify later in Robert Moore – she had known the parson, Roberson, one of the heroes of that social war, and not long since a neighbour of Mr. Brontë's; she had seen him armed on horseback, riding about the country and maintaining order more like a resolute citizen than a minister of peace; the affair of Heckmondwike, the insurrection in the church itself of independents against their minister, happened within an hour's walk of her house.

All these stories, this spectacle of a country full of sharp contrasts, sank into a virgin and powerful imagination which, though incapable of violating the truth, was wonderfully clever in reconstituting it in all its details. When Charlotte left Roe Head in 1832 she would no longer have written anything like *The Islanders*, or those stories of evil genii in which she had so often collaborated. Even politics, which at Haworth had served to feed her enthusiasm as young hero-worshipper, now appeared to her under its other aspect of social realities, of passions, of tangible interests and suffering. She matured rapidly, and began to prefer Ellen Nussey to the Duke of Wellington, realizing that her dreams were but dreams, and discovering life itself.

The knowledge she acquired at Roe Head was about the same that Amelia Sedley received from Miss Pinkerton: grammar, writing, a little arithmetic, a little French, deportment, sewing and em-

broidery, besides what the curricula of the time pompously called geography and the use of the globes. In the department of literature Miss Wooler gave her pupils Blair's lessons upon belles-lettres, which could do no harm to a mind whose fault lay in being too richly furnished.

We possess a few letters written by Charlotte from Roe Head. They are brief and couched in the severe style which she always used when speaking about herself. One day little Branwell trudged on foot to see his sister, returning immediately and covering forty miles. The Brontës loved one another, without many words.

CHAPTER FIVE

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After her return to Haworth Charlotte relieved her aunt of the care of her sisters, leaving to her only that of the household. We can picture her as she was then from Richardson's portrait in the National Gallery, and the recollections of a few of her contemporaries. She was short and small, even diminutive, but well-proportioned, with charming little hands and feet of which she was proud, beautiful chestnut hair, thick and silky, and eyes which arrested the attention of everybody. People who cannot appreciate beauty of expression found her ugly, and, in fact, her features were all irregular. Richardson's portrait shows us an admirable forehead under dark bands of hair, and expressive eyes, but the nose is too thin, the mouth large, the chin pointed, the cheekbones too prominent and the shoulders sloping, all of which indicated with cruel clearness the unhappy victim of consumption. She spoke without much animation, but with singular precision when she was feeling well. When she suffered, it was only with difficulty that she could utter a word. Her books and a few passages in her letters would lead us to think that she had gaiety and a capacity for satire that would easily turn to jesting, but she does not seem to have indulged much in this. As a little girl she was imaginative and ardent, as a woman she very soon became thoughtful and her gaiety, like the melancholy of many poets, expressed itself only in literature. At any rate, after she left Roe Head she always appeared serious, and at times this gravity deepened into melancholy bordering on despair. Other people in like circumstances could have accepted their situation without difficulty. Motherless girls of sixteen

have more than once taken care of their sisters under even harder circumstances without giving way to gloom. But they probably did not drag the chain of what Romanticists call the weight of genius, that is to say, the consciousness of exceptional gifts hindered instead of aided. It appears likely, also, that the sudden death of Maria and Elizabeth had left a shadow on the soul of their younger sister which was never afterwards lifted. Finally, her nervous system was charged with melancholy. However, she now became governess in her own home, while waiting for the much-dreaded day when she would have to teach strangers.

In the beginning this new life was agreeable to her, and the note of sadness is only struck at intervals. 'An account of one day is an account of all,' she wrote. 'In the morning, from nine o'clock till half-past twelve, I instruct my sisters, and draw; then we walk till dinner-time. After dinner I sew till tea-time, and after tea I either write, read, or do a little fancy-work, or draw, as I please. Thus, in one delightful, though somewhat monotonous, course my life is passed. I have been out only twice to tea since I came home. We are expecting company this afternoon, and on Tuesday next we shall have all the female teachers of the Sunday school to tea.'

The house where the Brontës went to tea belonged to a manufacturer in the 'bottom,' as they called the valley. A family scandal of some sort put an end to this rather agreeable social connection, though never particularly diverting, and the family at the parsonage sufficed to themselves, as had been the case ten years before.

Emily and Anne had grown up, and Branwell was almost a young man.

Anne was now twelve years old. She was a sweet, affectionate, silent girl. In another family she would have passed for a genius, for she too was centred on the ideal of art, but in comparison with her sisters she seems somewhat shadowy. She had what is called a mystical soul, and wrote poems full of deep religious sentiment, some of which are admirable.

Emily, who was two years older, adored her. It would be well if we possessed more knowledge of Emily's apprenticeship as a novelist. Her letters are rare, her papers were burned, probably by her own orders, and the few strangers who came in contact with her noted nothing but her capacity for silence. She was a true daughter of Yorkshire, a pure product of the moors, not in the least shy like Anne or fearful like Charlotte, but cold and reserved, her whole attitude revealing independence. There was nothing rustic in her appearance or manners; on the contrary, she possessed a native distinction which was Charlotte's inspiration when she desired to create a type of the true aristocrat. However, despite the innate refinement which appeared through her frigid exterior, Emily had the northern temperament with its aversion for strangers, its passionate attachment for its birthplace, the impossibility for it to exist away from its own surroundings and customs, and above all its inborn sincerity developing, when necessary, into cynicism and brutality. Charlotte shared Emily's horror of talking about nothing, of exaggerating, or of wearing one's heart on one's sleeve. One day she excuses herself to a friend for

having called her darling – the repentance of a true child of Yorkshire. Emily never had to excuse herself on the same grounds. Her affection for her own family, her indomitable courage and her genius expressed themselves in acts, never in words. She loved animals, dumb faithful friends that they are, and had all kinds: dogs, cats, parrots, wild geese and even a falcon. She had a ferocious dog that she had tamed and that worshipped her. In the pathways of the moors it is Emily whose memory fastens upon us. We see her, tall, thin and pale, her long steps placing her a little in front of the others. Everything has a voice for her in this wide, high and deep country, but she herself is silent, and fortunately her sisters are the same. This sky and this earth had been familiar to them since their early childhood, and the spirit of the wild landscape needed no phrases, no words. Charlotte and Anne felt a sort of fearful respect for their sister when she was thus in communication with nature.

'My sister Emily loved the moors,' Charlotte wrote. 'Flowers brighter than the rose bloomed in the blackest of the heath for her; out of a sullen hollow in a livid hillside her mind could make an Eden. She found in the bleak solitude many and dear delights; and not the least and best loved was – liberty. Liberty was the breath of Emily's nostrils; without it she perished.'

The present writer recalled Charlotte's 'sullen hollow in a livid hillside' when he saw two little girls sitting dreamily among the dry weeds of an abandoned quarry, on the edge of which the Brontës must often have paused in their walks.

Charlotte's chief diversion at this time was drawing. Her brother and her sisters also drew – Branwell remarkably well – and it seems that all of them hesitated for some time between art and literature. It will be remembered how Charlotte astonished her companions at Roe Head by the extraordinary patience with which she studied engravings that interested her. She had always worked without a master, and was obliged for this reason to wrest from the pictures themselves the secrets of technique. When she felt that she had observed and understood everything, she began with equal perseverance to reproduce it with pen or pencil. Her brother tells us that she spent six months on one of these copies, not without injury to her eyes. Several of her drawings are still at Haworth, but they are only striking because of the minuteness of detail, the whole effect being invariably cold and flat. On the other hand, a study made by Emily of her dog, Keeper, is full of life and motion and done with a freedom of touch greatly in contrast to the studied application of her elder sister. For a while, at the request of Mr. Brontë, William Robinson, a painter of Leeds, who had studied in London in Lawrence's studio, gave his children lessons, but this regular teaching was soon ended under the pretext, Mrs. Gaskell says, that Robinson was a man without principles. Perhaps, too, it was decided about this time to enter Branwell at the Royal Academy, and it seemed superfluous to pay for expensive private lessons for the daughters when the son was sure of being taught very soon by the best masters.

Charlotte carried on a lively correspondence with her friends Mary Taylor and Ellen Nussey, the

latter having received not less than five hundred letters from her. Many of them are more vivacious and assured than those she wrote to her father and sisters from Roe Head. Evidently, Emily's austere habit of expression was law at Haworth, and influenced the family relations of the Brontës, but Charlotte was not naturally averse to softer ways. Her gravity sometimes turns to gaiety, and there is a latent tenderness in all she writes: she is interested in events at Rydings, asks questions and demands news. When she refers to her own family circle her tone changes: one does not speak of oneself even to one's friends. Some of the letters to Ellen Nussey show the writer as a provincial girl at once severe and imaginative.

The Nusseys possessed considerable property, and two years after Ellen left boarding-school she was sent on a journey to London. Immediately Charlotte manifested alarm. London was indeed the goal of all her literary aspirations and the scene of the politics which had interested her from her earliest years; but the veiled pictures drawn by the elegant moralists of the *Rambler* and the *Mirror* – as effective as the maledictions of the Puritans against Babylon – had shown her a seductive and perverse city, and she was afraid for her friend. But at length a letter came from Ellen. She had been neither dazzled nor forgetful of her correspondent. Charlotte responded at once – probably the first letter she had ever sent to London:

'Your letter gave me real and heartfelt pleasure, mingled with no small share of astonishment. Mary had previously informed me of your departure for

London, and I had not ventured to calculate on any communication from you while surrounded by the splendours and novelties of that great city, which has been called the mercantile metropolis of Europe. Judging from human nature, I thought that a little country girl, for the first time in a situation so well calculated to excite curiosity and to distract attention would lose all remembrance, for a time at least, of distant and familiar objects, and give herself up entirely to the fascination of those scenes which were then presented to her view. Your kind, interesting and most welcome epistle showed me, however, that I had been both mistaken and uncharitable in these suppositions. I was greatly amused at the tone of nonchalance which you assumed while treating of London and its wonders. Did you not feel awed while gazing at St. Paul's and Westminster Abbey? Had you no feeling of intense and ardent interest when in St. James's you saw the palace where so many of England's kings have held their courts, and beheld the representations of their persons on the walls? You should not be too much afraid of appearing *country-bred*; the magnificence of London has drawn exclamations of astonishment from travelled men, experienced in the world, its wonders and beauties. Have you yet seen anything of the great personages whom the sitting of Parliament now detains in London – the Duke of Wellington, Sir Robert Peel, Earl Grey, Mr. Stanley, Mr. O'Connell? If I were you I would not be too anxious to spend my time in reading whilst in town. Make use of your own eyes for the purposes of observation now, and, for a time at least, lay aside the spectacles with which authors would furnish us.'

A variety of things appear in this letter: the emphasis of the Johnsonian style, the girlish ideas, a little jealousy perhaps, a background of sublime imagination, her former taste for politics, curiosity, and then, suddenly, the true Brontë tone of direct and penetrating observation. It was thus all her life with Charlotte: bubbling, powerful in the hidden depths where her real personality was at work, but cold, provincial, conventional like the little Protestant bourgeoise she appeared to most of her contemporaries. This everlasting dualism is seen in her whole life; but the rather stiff external manner, imposed upon her by her education and surroundings from infancy, only disguised the free and passionate artist she became when her genius, or, to put it better, her demon, dominated her.

A few months later Ellen returned to Yorkshire, and Charlotte allows herself a very unusual transport of joy and tenderness:

'My *own* dear Ellen, – I may rightfully and truly call you so now. You *have* returned or *are* returning from London – from the great city which is to me as apocryphal as Babylon, or Nineveh, or ancient Rome. You are withdrawing from the world (as it is called), and bringing with you – if your letters enable me to form a correct judgment – a heart as unsophisticated, as natural, as true, as that you carried there. I am slow, *very* slow, to believe the protestations of another; I know my own sentiments, I can read my own mind, but the minds of the rest of man and woman kind are to me sealed volumes, hieroglyphical scrolls, which I cannot easily either unseal or decipher. Yet time, careful study, long acquaintance,

overcome most difficulties; and, in your case, I think they have succeeded well in bringing to light and construing that hidden language, whose turnings, windings, inconsistencies, and obscurities so frequently baffle the researches of the honest observer of human nature. . . . I am truly grateful for your mindfulness of so obscure a person as myself, and I hope the pleasure is not altogether selfish; I trust it is partly derived from the consciousness that my friend's character is of a higher, a more steadfast order than I was once perfectly aware of. Few girls would have done as you have done – would have beheld the glare, and glitter, and dazzling display of London with dispositions so unchanged, hearts so uncontaminated. I see no affectation in your letters, no trifling, no frivolous contempt of plain, and weak admiration of showy, persons and things.'

Is there not something truly touching in this humility of the superior woman before her friend, because the latter has seen what she in her own heart desires passionately to see, too, and has remained unspoiled by the great spectacle? It must be admitted, however, that Ellen was more often the attentive disciple than the admired heroine. Here is a letter of advice from Charlotte which throws light on her moral nature as well as the development of her mind:

'You ask me to recommend you some books for your perusal. I will do so in as few words as I can. If you like poetry, let it be first-rate; Milton, Shakespeare, Thomson, Goldsmith, Pope (if you will, though I don't admire him), Scott, Byron, Campbell, Wordsworth, and Southey. Now don't be startled at

the names of Shakespeare and Byron. Both these were great men, and their works are like themselves. You will know how to choose the good, and to avoid the evil; the finest passages are always the purest, the bad are invariably revolting; you will never wish to read them over twice. Omit the comedies of Shakespeare, and the *Don Juan*, perhaps the *Cain* of Byron, though the latter is a magnificent poem, and read the rest fearlessly; that must indeed be a depraved mind which can gather evil from *Henry VIII*, from *Richard III*, from *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet* and *Julius Cæsar*. Scott's sweet, wild romantic poetry can do you no harm. Nor can Wordsworth's, nor Campbell's, nor Southey's – the greatest part at least of his; some is certainly objectionable. For history, read Hume, Rollin, and the *Universal History*, if you *can*; I never did. For fiction, read Scott alone; all novels after his are worthless. For biography, read Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, Southey's *Life of Nelson*, Lockhart's *Life of Burns*, Moore's *Life of Sheridan*, Moore's *Life of Byron*, Wolfe's *Remains*. For natural history, read Bewick and Audubon, and Goldsmith, and White's *History of Selborne*. For divinity, your brother will advise you there. I can only say, adhere to standard authors, and avoid novelty.'

At this time she was eighteen years old. It is evident that she felt herself strong enough, and pure enough, to read everything worth while, reserving the privilege of forming her judgment upon it and forbidding weaker natures from anything she thought might do them harm. Her tone in this letter is no longer that of a young girl.

She was conscious, as she was later in writing her novels, of a superiority sufficient to enable her to look life in the face. More than once her critics mortally insulted her by insinuating that she was none the better for this. The indignation with which she resented this outrage shows to what an extent it was a calumny. Never, indeed, did she allow artistic considerations to interfere with her strong and severe sense of morality, and her realism never shocked anybody but hypocrites, or the over-squeamish.

CHAPTER SIX

★

This life, filled with easy and regular duties, continued for three years. In the summer of 1835 it became urgent for Branwell to begin his professional studies. Emily was seventeen, Anne fifteen, and the additional education to which they had a right could not be further postponed. Mr. Brontë's small income could not support this triple expense, and Charlotte decided to seek a position.

Branwell and his future were the chief and almost sole preoccupation of the family. He had always been the god not only of his sisters but of his father and even of cold Miss Branwell, and it was understood in all the countryside that he was to be a great man. Mr. Brontë told anecdotes of his extraordinary precocity. Once when the child had but just begun to wear boy's clothes his father had asked him if there were any difference between the intelligence of a man and that of a woman, and he had replied:

'The same as between their bodies.'

Branwell never went to school, but his father gave all his time to him. He was as sociable as his sisters were homekeeping and retiring. He liked the company of the boys in the village, talked to everybody, and very early his intelligence, his masculine face and a natural gallantry of manner gave him the air of a man. He would have been very handsome without his reddish hair, which betrayed his Celtic origin. He had a large and powerful forehead, a straight nose, open, expressive eyes, and a well-formed but weak mouth. His straightforward and generous nature contributed as much as his face to his popularity. He was a village boy, but of the kind that Burns must have been: and genius in a youth always re-

sembles heroism. At seventeen his nascent faults could be seen: lightness, weakness, love of pleasure, but he was neither vicious nor base. His father was largely responsible for the deplorable failure of his life.

The Black Bull, standing not more than fifty steps from the parsonage, is a large square inn, comfortable and clean. There still existed at Haworth the custom of holding *arvills* or funeral feasts; the mourners went directly from the churchyard to the Black Bull so conveniently near, and there consoled themselves noisily. It is difficult to understand how the son of the rector became gradually a frequenter and finally the central figure of this scandalous feasting.

It was usually the sexton who ordered these repasts. He lived near the parsonage and Branwell was perfectly at home in his house. It is probable that this grave-digger and organizer of banquets felt that the presence of a learned boy whose talk one could listen to for hours at a time, would enhance the pleasure of the drinking-bout – and Mr. Brontë feared to irritate his people who were very jealous of the *arvills* which they knew to be disagreeable to the clergy. Branwell became therefore at Haworth, little by little, what the improviser is to an Italian village. When strangers arrived at the Black Bull – wool-dealers or travelling salesmen – the landlord told them what a pleasant afternoon they would have if the rector's son should come in. Sometimes, in fact, Branwell happened to come; if not, the landlord soon took the habit of sending for him. He always came in a good humour, without posing or bragging, but every time he felt his own superiority to these boasted city men, and settled deeper into his danger-

ous rôle of young cock-of-the-village. He was naturally full of ambition, and his Irish imagination painted his future in the most brilliant colours. One day he astonished a travelling salesman by his minute knowledge of the streets of London, where he had never set foot. The poor boy thought of London as the logical continuation of his life at Haworth; he saw himself there a celebrated painter or an author surrounded by flattery; he believed himself rehearsing in the room at the Black Bull the rôle of Johnson or of Sheridan which he would soon be called upon to play.

He was acquiring habits of which he was unconscious. As soon as he returned to the austere house where his sisters worked in silence, he too took up again his pen or drawing pencil and was himself once more. He wrote many verses, always on religious themes; his prose was Attic and graceful, in imitation of Addison and the essayists. He was the first to have his work printed, a Leeds newspaper, the *Mercury*, accepting one of his poems and later publishing many more. His talent for drawing was without doubt remarkable, and his portraits of his sisters, though badly painted, are not only good likenesses but are alive. All that he did heightened the hope and pride of the little circle that lived only for him, while at the same time preparing for these ardent souls all the bitterness of impending disappointment.

In July, 1835, Branwell presented his official request for admission to the Royal Academy, and Charlotte, after interviews with two neighbouring families in need of a teacher, accepted a position as assistant mistress to Miss Wooler at Roe Head. She continued for three years in this situation.

Charlotte's return to Roe Head was a piece of good fortune for her. Miss Wooler was much attached to her former pupil, Roe Head was only an hour's walk from Birstal and Gomersal where Ellen Nussey and Mary Taylor lived, and Charlotte brought Emily with her. Her first feeling was one of profound joy to have escaped once more the servitude of the life of a private teacher, and she wrote Ellen a letter which was almost enthusiastic.

It was on July 29 that she returned to Roe Head, three years after her departure. We have no information of the impression Emily made upon her young companions – surely very different from that of Charlotte's arrival five years before. This tall silent girl could not excite the sympathetic curiosity which had surrounded her elder sister from the beginning. Every turn of the wheels carrying her farther away from Haworth had only increased the speechless melancholy that had taken possession of her from the start, and Roe Head only seemed to her a mournful place of exile. The family routine of the boarding-school was a punishment to her, the systematic teaching did not interest her, and she felt herself nothing but a prisoner. Her health soon began to decline. 'Every morning when she woke,' Charlotte wrote, 'the vision of home and the moors rushed on her, and darkened and saddened the day that lay before her. Nobody knew what ailed her but me. I knew only too well. In this struggle her health was quickly broken: her white face, attenuated form, and failing strength threatened rapid decline. I felt in my heart she would die if she did not go home, and with this conviction obtained her recall. She had only been three months at school.'

Emily wrote a great many verses during these three months of exile, composing them in the classroom in the evening while the others were at play. Their almost unique theme is Haworth and its memories. They are sombre in tone but courageous, and often enough their sadness is relieved by hope; now and then they breathe that Stoicism which was Emily's true nature, and they are penetrated everywhere by the thought of death. These girls had grown up too near a churchyard, and the poetry of the tomb, the cold tomb – not the flower-grown hillock of Gray – spoke to them as it did to Shakespeare.

But whatever the idea of these poems, their expression invariably shows the mastery which distinguishes all that this extraordinary girl wrote. We may think what we will of the character of Emily, that she was strange and difficult to live with, but when we read these full and perfect verses and remember that they were the effusions of a child in her hours of leisure, we feel the presence of genius and bow to it. Here is part of one of the poems:

'For the moors! For the moors, where the short grass
Like velvet beneath us should lie!
For the moors! For the moors, where each high pass
Rose sunny against the clear sky!

For the moors, where the linnet was trilling
Its song on the old granite stone;
Where the lark, the wild skylark, was filling
Every breast with delight like its own!

What language can utter the feeling
Which rose, when in exile afar,
On the brow of a lonely hill kneeling,
I saw the brown heath growing there?

It was scattered and stunted, and told me
That soon even that would be gone:
It whispered "The grim walls enfold me,
I have bloomed in my last summer's sun."

But not the loved music, whose waking
Makes the soul of the Swiss die away,
Has a spell more adored and heartbreaking
Than, for me, in that blighted heath lay.

The spirit which bent 'neath its power,
How it longed – how it burned to be free!
If I could have wept in that hour,
Those tears had been heaven to me.

Well – well; the sad minutes are moving,
Though loaded with trouble and pain;
And some time the loved and the loving
Shall meet on the mountains again!'

Charlotte had been so saddened by the sight of her sister's decline in such a short time that, though little Anne had taken the place of Emily in the school, her melancholy continually increased. Miss Wooler would have been glad to have her pass Sunday as often as possible at Birstal or Gomersal; but it seemed to Charlotte that to absent herself was a neglect of duty, and she never left the empty boarding-school. Books which had formerly delighted her now disgusted her; she passed whole hours in the evening meditating and giving herself up to depression. In the darkness she saw strange things. One evening she heard a voice within her distinctly repeating mysterious verses which might have been inspired by Isaiah, but which she had never read anywhere. Her equilibrium was shaken, and, like poor Silvio Pellico

during the first months of his imprisonment, she felt herself the plaything of some wicked power. It was not long before religious melancholy was added to this nightmare, and a torture began which was to last for two years.

It will be seen later that the Brontës – at least Charlotte and after her Emily – had reached singular religious independence. At an early date Emily had adopted a sullen belief in theism of which she never spoke, but which appeared alive and powerful in the last poem she wrote. She was never heard but once to express an opinion concerning religion. Mary Taylor relates that one day at Haworth she was asked to explain her religious belief, and replied that it was an affair between herself and God. 'Well said!' exclaimed Emily, who was lying on the rug before the fire. But timid Anne, who was always the prey of Calvinistic fancies, and only owed it to a merciful Providence that she died with an admirable hymn of self-abandonment upon her lips, did not fear to speak about states of mind which a Catholic would never mention. She has written, in supplicating and painful verses, the terrible prayer of Blanco White: 'O God – if there is a God – save my soul – if I have a soul!' As for Charlotte, her books show that she was attached to the Church of England though resolutely anti-clerical; otherwise, she was very broad-minded, given to asking disturbing questions regarding life after death and, in one place where her imagination had free play, coming very near to pantheism.

At the time of her return to Roe Head she had not yet reached this stage. The gloomy Calvinism which lay at the root of the Protestantism of her time, the terror of predestination, the haunting fear of unfor-

given sin, the idea of a God at once suffering and avenging, dominated her, and she descended defenceless into the obscure night of the soul. She utters this cry of distress in a letter to her friend Ellen: 'I know the treasures of the Bible; I love and adore them. I can *see* the Well of Life in all its clearness and brightness; but when I stoop down to drink of the pure waters they fly from my lips as if I were Tantalus.' A few months later she was at the height of her crisis, and writes: 'I will no longer shrink from answering your questions. I *do* wish to be better than I am. I pray fervently sometimes to be made so. . . . Do not mistake me – do not think I am good; I only wish to be so. I only hate my forward flippancy and forwardness. Oh! I am no better than ever I was. I am in that state of horrid, gloomy uncertainty that, at this moment, I would submit to be old, grey-haired, to have passed all my youthful days of enjoyment, and to be settling on the verge of the grave, if I could only thereby ensure the prospect of reconciliation to God, and redemption through His Son's merits. I never was exactly careless of these matters, but I have always taken a clouded and repulsive view of them; and now, if possible, the clouds are gathering darker, and a more oppressive despondency weighs on my spirits.'

Her strength rapidly diminished in this dark struggle. She had been very fond of Mary Taylor's family (the Yorkes in *Shirley*). Her friend's father was a man of taste and knowledge, who had travelled and who knew French, but who liked to amuse himself by advancing the most daring religious and political opinions in a rough Yorkshire dialect. Charlotte had very much enjoyed these discussions. But

now, when she was challenged to continue them, her face fell and she remained silent, knowing that words would fail her.

She was disturbed, also, about the future. Branwell had not entered the Academy as they had hoped he would, and continued to vegetate at home. Miss Wooler was kind but not rich. What she could afford to pay Charlotte barely sufficed to support her and to dress Anne. Emily had been forced to resolve upon a new effort to earn her living away from home. She had become assistant to the mistress of a large boarding-school in Halifax, where she worked from seven o'clock in the morning to eleven at night. Everything seemed to turn against the poor girls. Miss Wooler was obliged to leave Roe Head and remove her school to Dewsbury Moor, a low, rather unhealthful situation. There Anne fell ill, to the distraction of her elder sister. Miss Wooler would not admit that this illness was anything but a cold, without danger, while Charlotte saw it as the forerunner of death. This disagreement almost led to the separation of the two friends. Finally, Charlotte's nervousness became so serious that a doctor called in consultation sent her back to her father. This was in May, 1838. Several months earlier Emily had also returned to the shelter of home. Charlotte's joy at seeing Emily again, and of being once more in the only places she really loved, and at the beginning of the fine weather, proved her balm of Gilead. 'A calm and even mind like yours,' she wrote to Ellen, 'cannot conceive the feelings of the shattered wretch who is now writing to you, when, after weeks of mental and bodily anguish not to be described, something like peace began to dawn again.' Her friends were

perfect. They came alternately to see her, and were rivals in the privilege of tending her. For several months she gave herself up to this tender care and little by little grew better.

The end of her convalescence coincided with a very unexpected event. The brother of her friend Ellen, the Reverend Henry Nussey, then a curate in Sussex, asked for her hand in marriage. She had a bright vision of the peaceful parsonage in a pretty village of southern England, and the joy she might have there in receiving frequent visits from her friend. But poor Charlotte, already beaten by life at the age of twenty-three, did not keep for her novels alone the ideas they express concerning love and marriage. She had no petty thoughts on these great subjects. She refused Mr. Nussey – who appeared later in *Jane Eyre* in the character of Saint-John, the frigid clergyman. 'I had a kindly leaning towards him, because he is an amiable and well-disposed man. Yet I had not, and could not have, that intense attachment which would make me willing to die for him; and if ever I marry it must be in that light of adoration that I will regard my husband. Ten to one I shall never have the chance again; but *n'importe*. Moreover, I was aware that he knew so little of me he could hardly be conscious to whom he was writing. Why! it would startle him to see me in my natural home character; he would think I was a wild romantic enthusiast indeed. I could not sit all day long making a grave face before my husband. I would laugh, and satirize, and say whatever came into my head first. And if he were a clever man, and loved me, the whole world, weighed in the balance against his smallest wish, should be light as air.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

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During the Christmas holidays, in 1837, Charlotte and Anne came home from Dewsbury Moor and Emily from Halifax, and all together they examined their situation. For a long time they had had the habit of walking for hours up and down the dining-room, by the light of the fire, after their father, their aunt and Tabby had gone.

None of them had any taste for teaching, and Emily had a horror of it. Branwell's lack of success could not but discourage them in the hope of making their way as artists themselves. Literature remained, which had always been at heart their strongest passion. Branwell also was inclined in this direction, and at that time his wish was law. His sisters neglected, without abandoning entirely, the interminable novels which had occupied their childhood; but religion, nature, the pains of exile, separations and vague dreams of love had nourished their poetic inspiration, and they realized that upon these few monotonous strings they had succeeded in making some music. Their manuscripts were there in the drawers: why not try to publish them? Then they conceived one of those simple ideas which only come to the very inexperienced.

Charlotte would write to Southey, who had been poet-laureate for twenty-five years and was one of their great admirations, would send him her verses and ask his advice. This was done. Three weeks later Branwell wrote Wordsworth a letter which the poet found worthy of preservation, and the tone of which defines the mentality of this village genius better than any analysis:

'Sir, – I most earnestly entreat you to read and pass your judgment upon what I have sent you, because from the day of my birth to this the nineteenth year of my life I have lived among secluded hills, where I could neither know what I was or what I could do. I read for the same reason that I ate or drank, because it was a real craving of nature. I wrote on the same principle as I spoke – out of the impulse and feelings of the mind; nor could I help it, for what came, came out, and there was the end of it. For as to self-conceit, that could not receive food from flattery, since to this hour not half a dozen people in the world know that I have ever penned a line.

'But a change has taken place now, sir; and I am arrived at an age wherein I must do something for myself; the powers I possess must be exercised to a definite end, and as I don't know them myself I must ask of others what they are worth. Yet there is not one here to tell me; and still, if they are worthless, time will henceforth be too precious to be wasted on them.

'Do pardon me, sir, that I have ventured to come before one whose works I have most loved in our literature, and who most has been with me a divinity of the mind, laying before him one of my writings, and asking of him a judgment of its contents. I must come before some one from whose sentence there is no appeal; and such a one is he who has developed the theory of poetry as well as its practice, and both in such a way as to claim a place in the memory of a thousand years to come.

'My aim, sir, is to push out into the open world, and for this I trust not poetry alone; that might

launch the vessel, but could not bear her on. Sensible and scientific prose, bold and vigorous efforts in my walk in life, would give a further title to the notice of the world; and then again poetry ought to brighten and crown that name with glory. But nothing of all this can be ever begun without means, and as I don't possess these I must in every shape strive to gain them. Surely, in this day, when there is not a *writing* poet worth a sixpence, the field must be open, if a better man can step forward.

'What I send you is the Prefatory Scene of a much longer subject, in which I have striven to develop strong passions and weak principles struggling with a high imagination and acute feelings, till, as youth hardens towards age, evil deeds and short enjoyments end in mental misery and bodily ruin. Now, to send you the whole of this would be a mock upon your patience; what you see does not even pretend to be more than the description of an imaginative child. But read it, sir; and, as you would hold a light to one in utter darkness – as you value your own kind-heartedness – *return* me an *answer*, if but one word, telling me whether I should write on, or write no more. Forgive undue warmth, because my feelings in this matter cannot be cool; and believe me, sir, with deep respect, your really humble servant,

'P. B. BRONTË.'

Poor Branwell! so simple, so naïve in his apparent presumption, so brave and so feeble. He did not know that the sentence in which he describes the subject of his piece was literally the prophetic summary of his own life.

Wordsworth's reply has been lost, but we have the

letter which Southey wrote to Charlotte. He recognizes in his correspondent the possession of the 'faculty of verse' in a high degree. Fifty years earlier, he says, her gift would have sufficed to win celebrity, but it had now become so common that little attention was paid to it. Southey wrote, 'The day dreams in which you habitually indulge are likely to induce a distempered state of mind.' He warned her against a natural taste which might turn her aside from her duties, and ended by advising her, not to renounce poetry altogether, but to make it the secret and pacifying joy of her best hours.

It was the usual letter, full of wisdom, of the famous man, who is often astonished at his own good fortune and made timid by success, written to the beginner whom he sees exposed to the perverting effects of the literary mania. Charlotte's first impression of the letter was quite different. All her life she was impressionable, susceptible, to an extraordinary degree, and this reaction must have been taken more than once for pride.

'At the first perusal of your letter,' she replied to Southey, 'I felt only shame and regret that I had ever ventured to trouble you with my crude rhapsody; I felt a painful heat rise to my face when I thought of the quires of paper I had covered with what once gave me so much delight.' She imagined Southey picturing his unknown correspondent as an indolent woman striving to fill an empty existence with almost ridiculous dreams, while she saw herself as she was, a poor girl trying to make something of her talents. She had none of the cleverness, the calculated reticence of the sophisticated. She never feared the unpleasant smile which the expression of naïve senti-

ments sometimes induces. Poet Laureate though he was, Southey had been mistaken, and there is irony and indignation in the rest of the letter she wrote him:

'You do not forbid me to write; you do not say that what I write is utterly destitute of merit. You only warn me against the folly of neglecting real duties for the sake of imaginative pleasures; of writing for the love of fame; for the selfish excitement of emulation. You kindly allow me to write poetry for its own sake, provided I leave undone nothing which I ought to do, in order to pursue that single, absorbing, exquisite gratification. I am afraid, sir, you think me very foolish. I know the first letter I wrote to you was all senseless trash from beginning to end; but I am not altogether the idle dreaming being it would seem to denote. My father is a clergyman of limited though competent income, and I am the eldest of his children. He expended quite as much in my education as he could afford in justice to the rest. I thought it therefore my duty, when I left school, to become a governess.'

And she goes on to give a picture of her life as assistant-mistress in such a manner as to convince Southey there was no question of her dreaming away her time. Toward the end of the letter her tone changes. Her soul was of too noble a cast to harbour resentment against anybody for a mere misunderstanding, and she ends her letter with simple and generous gratitude for the kindness of a great man in writing her frankly and sympathetically.

This letter moved Southey, and he responded by an invitation to her to visit him at Keswick should she

ever come to the lake country. She did visit it, in fact, but not till thirteen years later, when Southey had long been dead.

Charlotte now returned to Dewsbury Moor, and soon fell back into the piteous condition described in the last chapter. It is probable that the idea of winning independence by her pen became again what it had always been: one of those dreams which eventually determine the dreamer's life. For the time being it was necessary to work, however, and for several years more she, Anne and Branwell, with frequent interruptions and an ever-growing disgust, attempted to earn their living by private teaching – an employment much more disagreeable than its name would seem to indicate. Emily remained at home, keeping the house, but always thinking and leading a sort of somnambulistic existence. Many people saw her during this time making bread in the kitchen with an open German book standing against the edge of the kneading trough. Her bread was good, and the house was well kept, as the Brontës were always excellent housekeepers.

Anne was the first to assume the yoke of teacher in a family at Mirfield, and it was she who bore it the longest and the most constantly. Her beginnings were painful, as Charlotte's were a little later, and her first impressions must have contributed considerably to an exaggeration in the lively imagination of her elder sister of the difficulties of their position. All the literary work of the Brontë sisters – except Emily's single volume – is full of unhappy teachers, and it requires some effort to distinguish the real life of the authors from what their talents have added.

When we think that Charlotte was a woman of

genius, and that it cannot be agreeable to a woman of genius to lead the life of a chambermaid; if we remember that even if she had possessed a less rare intelligence than hers she still had a passion for liberty, for her peaceful life at Haworth, and that her keen sensibility readily exaggerated her annoyances, we will understand how she suffered from difficulties which would have seemed negligible to many others, and how her novels came to be filled, in consequence, with experiences which had in reality been confined to only a few months of her existence. A few months, or even a few weeks of painful anguish in the life of a poet is enough to steep his verse in tears and show him as a martyr in what is often the common lot of mankind. Charlotte so sincerely believed herself more unhappy than she was that we pity her as if she had not exaggerated.

She remained at one time for three months – from May to July, 1839 – in the house of a certain Mr. Sidgwick. Her pupils, though incapable of the atrocities fearlessly described by Anne in *Agnes Grey*, were nevertheless badly brought up, and Mr. A. C. Benson, who defends this family against Charlotte's biographer, admits that one of them threw a Bible at the head of his teacher. This incident testifies to the truth of another story related by Charlotte herself. One day one of these young wretches wounded her in the temple with a stone. Mrs. Sidgwick, observing the mark of the blow the following day, asked what had happened. 'An accident, ma'am,' replied Charlotte. This discreet rejoinder raised her in the esteem of her pupils, and some time later the youngest boy took her affectionately by the hand, in the presence of his mother, and said, 'I love 'ou, Miss Brontë,' upon

which Mrs. Sidgwick said: 'Love the *governess*, my dear!'

Charlotte complained in a letter that not only was she burdened with all the daily care of the children but loaded with dressmaking and mending as well, and that Mrs. Sidgwick rebuked her when she showed fatigue or sadness. The future novelist appears in one of her letters where the pleasure of observing made her forget the annoyance of being treated like a servant. 'One of the pleasantest afternoons I have spent here – indeed, the only one at all pleasant – was when Mr. (Sidgwick) walked out with his children, and I had orders to follow a little behind. As he strolled on through his fields, with his magnificent Newfoundland dog at his side, he looked very like what a frank, wealthy Conservative gentleman ought to be.'

Mrs. Gaskell tells us that later when Charlotte came for the first time to visit her during a few days at Manchester, she never tired of studying the children of her hostess. She had never before seen any who seemed attractive, and it was a joy for her to find young people who were both considerate and polite. She referred to this in all her subsequent letters, just as she wrote again and again, long after she had left the Sidgwick family, of her inexpressible relief at escaping from her young torturers. It was like a refrain.

On her return to Haworth Charlotte gave for a while the necessary care to her health, and then applied herself to the duty of finding another situation. In spite of all sorts of efforts, of letters and advertisements, it was not until the spring of 1841 that she was able to find one which did not inspire her in advance with insurmountable terror. During

this period of waiting she resumed the quiet daily life which her brief stay in the Sidgwick family had so uselessly interrupted.

As usual her friends sought every means to divert her. She was contented at home and, as we shall see later on, was never more determined to remain there than when it had become easier for her to leave. But now, at the age of twenty-three, imaginative as she was, and having read all her life the works of poets, historians and travellers, she was like a caged lark: a single flight before falling back again into the family nest would have sufficed her, but everything conspired to keep her a prisoner. 'Mary's letters,' she wrote about this time, 'spoke of some of the pictures and cathedrals she had seen – pictures the most exquisite, cathedrals the most venerable. I hardly know what swelled to my throat as I read her letter: such a vehement impatience of restraint and steady work; such a strong wish for wings – wings such as wealth can furnish; such an urgent thirst to see, to know, to learn; something internal seemed to expand bodily for a minute. I was tantalized by the consciousness of faculties unexercised – then all collapsed, and I despaired.'

From her earliest infancy she had longed to see the ocean of which all the English poets had spoken to her, the grey North Sea or German Ocean, as it was then called. Ellen Nussey had an uncle who lived on his large farm at Easton, near Burlington, a short distance from the coast, and toward the end of August she took her friend there. Their host made a fête of their arrival. Their welcome was so warm, so cordial that for two days the girls could not escape even long enough to run to the nearest beach. In the

evening Charlotte listened intently, and could distinctly hear the deep breathing of the sea. At last, on the morning of the third day they started off early, rapidly devouring the two or three miles that separated them from the coast. When they were near enough to see the white crests of the waves Ellen, who was walking ahead, turned round to see her friend. Charlotte had stopped and was weeping freely, and made signs to be let alone.

This little journey was the great event of the year. A few weeks later she wrote Miss Nussey with a simplicity hiding emotion: 'Have you forgotten the sea by this time, Ellen?' And Anne too, at about the same period, noted on a piece of paper upon which she wrote down the memorable happenings of her obscure existence: 'I have seen the sea and York Cathedral.'

A short time before her departure for Easton Charlotte had received a second proposal of marriage. But occurring as it did between an experience so painful as her sojourn in the Sidgwick family and a joy so vivid as her first sight of the sea, this incident seemed to her somewhat commonplace and even rather comical. A former curate of her father's, then rector of a parish in Colne, had come to visit Mr. Brontë, bringing with him a young clergyman named Bryce, fresh from the University of Dublin. This young man was witty and gay, and full of Irish mettle. His humorous sallies were amusing, and Charlotte, who was only timid away from home, answered him smartly. But toward the end of the evening the Hibernian, as she called him, added compliments to his nonsense, and this was displeasing. The little Puritan froze, and the visitors being gone, promptly forgot their visit.

A few days later, however, a letter arrived written in an unknown hand. It was a declaration and proposal of marriage. Charlotte, who did not wholly lack cruelty in matters of sentiment – it is evident enough in all her novels – jeered at the adventure in relating it to her friends.

It may be noted that Charlotte was like many women who are difficult to please but still capable of sympathy, and have a sort of amused curiosity with regard to men who seem to them brusque but interesting animals not to be approached too near. Nearly all her letters written during the eighteen months between her departure from the home of the Sidgwicks and her advent into the White family – a time full of all kinds of anxiety – contain roguish allusions to a new Haworth curate named Weightman whom Ellen Nussey had met at the Brontës', and who had probably made love to her, since he did so to everybody. We meet with these surprises in reading Charlotte's correspondence. The new-comer was known at the parsonage as Miss Celia Amelia, doubtless because of his sentimentalism, but he was a hearty fellow, full of life and fire and even talent. He inclined to Newmanism, then coming into fashion in the universities, and as soon as he arrived flung the gage of battle to the Dissenters of the village. The latter, learning that the parish church was ringing with violent attacks upon them, punished Mr. Brontë as the responsible offender by following a method dear to them and refused to pay the church rates. General emotion. The rector convoked and calmed them. The result was a decision to close their chapels for one whole Sunday and to attend the church services in order to hear special explanations. At the

morning service a young comrade of Mr. Weightman's crushed them with a terrible sermon. In the afternoon Mr. Weightman, without mercy for his poor defenceless listeners, finished them by a discourse so learned, violent and eloquent that even Charlotte, hostile as she was to the ideas of Puseyism, was filled with admiration.

Such was Mr. Weightman under his ecclesiastic aspect. More often, however, he was a very different person, quite forgetful of his white cravat. He was an assiduous attendant upon all the young ladies of the county, and Charlotte registered his rapid changes of heart. He began with herself. One St. Valentine's eve he rode twenty miles over mountain roads in order that Miss Brontë should receive from some mysterious post office the traditional declaration in verse. Charlotte divined the writer, sent the piece to Ellen Nussey, and asked her shortly after, in that somewhat tomboyish tone which is one of the faults of her intimate correspondence, whether she had lighted her pipe with it. When Anne returned for the holidays the young man kept his eyes fixed upon her above his Prayer Book, in church, and sighed aloud to attract her attention. He went to Ripon to pass examinations, and while there wrote Branwell that he had twice been madly in love; he sent quantities of game to Charlotte, and when at last he decided after six weeks of absence, to return to Haworth, he brought back a miniature of a Miss Walton to whom his fickle heart remained comparatively faithful, as Charlotte had time to make a copy of the picture before his passion had grown cold. It seems clear that he interested Miss Brontë, who found him charming as long as he did not devote his attentions to her.

Charlotte employed the leisure forced upon her by the lack of any remunerative occupation in composing a novel – which might be called her first had she not already written twenty others before her engagement at Miss Wooler's. This work she sent to Wordsworth. It was an imitation of Richardson which, like its models, might have been extended to fill ten volumes, and which even she herself did not consider very good. In one of her prefaces she includes this book with those which cured her of redundance and too much ornament in writing. Her letter of thanks to Wordsworth is written in a playful and detached tone, with nothing of the argumentative sensitiveness she had shown in her former letter to Southey, and with nothing either of the dignity, the profound conviction that she had given her best, which were to characterize later on her defence of her novels.

At the same time, her sisters also amused themselves by writing endless tales to which they too attached no importance. They wrote for the sake of writing, and even more, it would seem, to maintain a right than to attain an end. They were determined not to allow themselves to be absorbed by their money difficulties, their housework and their Sunday school.

Branwell also compelled himself to avoid falling into the rut of Haworth, but unfortunately he lacked the indomitable energy of his sisters, and his inner light was constantly obscured. Each of his failures left him more irritable and more feeble. A studio was rented for him at Bradford, and there he painted a few portraits; but he had an immense and dangerous amount of leisure, was more often at the George

Hotel than in his studio, and became familiar with whisky, 'the demon whisky,' as he called it in a heart-rending letter.

Whenever he returned to Haworth the landlord of the Black Bull covered the door of his clock case with chalk marks to reckon his account. He continued to present nervously his prose and verse to writers of renown and editors of reviews. How could a village lad know that this was not the right way to proceed? He thought himself as practical as he was poetical, and his repeated failures seemed incomprehensible to him. He begged the editor of *Blackwood's* to suggest a subject for an article for him to write. No answer ever came, and there is something poignant in the adjuration of his fourth or fifth letter: 'Sir, read now at last,' etc. He met Hartley, son of the great Coleridge, and they almost became friends. Hartley made him translate, in verse, two books of Horace's *Odes*, but it does not appear that this work proved an effective decoy for the London editors, who remained deaf to Branwell's solicitations. Finally, Branwell decided to follow the example of his sisters, and engaged himself as tutor to a Mr. Postlethwaite at Broughton. He only remained five months, from January to June, 1840. In the following October, as nothing better offered, he became an employé of the Leeds-Manchester railway, and it was he who gave out the tickets at the window of the new little station at Sowerby Bridge, and then at Luddenden Foot. His weak and changeable character struggled between the humiliation of his disappointed hopes and the feverish desire to save what he felt in himself as nobility, between forgetfulness sought, unfortunately, in dissipation, and salvation by an exertion of

courage. He formed a friendship with Mr. Grundy, a young engineer of frank and high-toned character. Their relations were noble and their letters do honour to human language. But the influences among which Branwell lived were too strong for him to resist, and, after having passed six months without touching a drop of whisky, he fell lower than ever before. There is a terrible mixture of shame and cynicism in one of his letters which the present author prefers to omit, a brutal picture of an orgy which he dedicates to his 'old knave of trumps,' the secretary of the Masonic lodge at Haworth. Years later he referred tremblingly in a lucid moment to the 'hell' of cold debauchery he had lived through at Luddenden Foot.

His sisters began to divine a part of the truth, and when Charlotte refers to him in her letters it is always with tenderness, but a tenderness with which a sad smile begins to appear. His misfortunes served as a warning to his sisters. More and more we see them turn away, with regret and pain, from the artistic ideal with which they had hoped dutifully to fill their lives as well as their souls, and become preoccupied with respect to the future. The great plan at this time was to open a school. Miss Branwell agreed to lend them money enough to build a wing to the parsonage, and they dreamed of being reunited with their father in the home where they had grown up. They had acquired in Miss Wooler's school such practical knowledge as was indispensable to their success, and they counted upon a sure independence and upon a little leisure. Vacation after vacation, when they were all gathered again in the parsonage, they weighed the pros and cons of their plan and convinced themselves that the idea was a happy one.

At last, in March, 1841, Charlotte found some kind people who were seeking the 'commodity known as a governess.' The Whites, of Rawdon, had indeed rather turbulent children, but both children and parents were warm-hearted, and little by little Miss Brontë timidly allowed herself to feel happy and confident. When she spoke to them of her projects, they encouraged and offered to aid her. But the Whites knew the world better than their governess did, and warned her that something would have to be done to distinguish her boarding-school from the innumerable others in England. They advised her to take her sisters for several months to the Continent, and assured her that a mastery of the French language would give them the necessary superiority and make their school fashionable. Miss Wooler also shared these opinions, and was ready to turn over her school to her former pupils. Just at this time too, Charlotte's great friends, the Taylors, were thinking of leaving for the Continent. During the previous year they had sent to Haworth more than forty French novels in which they were studying current French, and Charlotte seems to have devoured these books. Things began to approach a definite arrangement. Anne had been long enough away from home, and she would return to Haworth. Charlotte and Emily would go to Brussels – they had at first considered Lille – where they hoped to learn not only French but German as well, and the Taylors would also establish themselves there. As soon as they should have mastered French, Charlotte and Emily would come back to the parsonage and begin building. The year 1842 began with these modest and reasonable hopes.

CHAPTER EIGHT

★

About the middle of February Charlotte and Emily, escorted by their father, started for Brussels; Mary Taylor and her brother, who was an experienced traveller, joined them *en route*. The party halted for two days at the Chapter Coffee House in London, a little old hotel in Paternoster Row, where Mr. Brontë had sometimes stayed before his marriage.[1] Mary Taylor acted as cicerone to her companions.

Their first visit was to St. Paul's Cathedral, which was so near that its huge bells shook the windows of their room. Like good provincials they mounted to the dome, where Charlotte's eyes immediately sought out Westminster Abbey and the Houses of Parliament. More than anything else they visited picture galleries. Thirteen years earlier Charlotte had made a list of the painters whose works she most wished to know. She was now twenty-six years old, and probably had not seen three tolerable pictures in her whole life. Mary Taylor said that she knew all sorts of details concerning pictures and painters. Emily was equally informed, but had her own opinion upon every point.

During this first journey to London Charlotte never went beyond the City, and when, later on, she became familiar with the fashionable quarters she did not like them, always preferring the old streets, crowded and full of shops, with what she called their air of taking things seriously.

In 1842 travellers went directly from London to Ostend in seventeen or eighteen hours. In *Villette*

[1] The street was no wider than it is now, and the shopkeepers' goods invaded the sidewalk. The hotel was one of the oldest houses in the quarter, with a vaulted passage crossing the street. The house was much frequented by the neighbouring booksellers.

we have a minutely autobiographical account, touching in its sincerity, of Charlotte's voyage. There was something solemn in a journey which for the first time carried Charlotte away from her native county, to settle not only in the midst of strangers but among people of another race and another religion. Since the French Revolution her compatriots had gradually ceased going to the cities of the Loire to seek what they believed to be the purest French, and went to Brussels, which is pretty, cheap and conveniently near, or to the shores of the Lake of Geneva, where, among Protestants, they felt less strange. Charlotte, whom we shall soon see more Puritan, narrow and insular than ever, would probably have liked Paris better than the little Belgian capital. She had vague ideas about geography, believed that she sufficiently characterized France by calling it a wine-country, and regarded Marseilles as a city of delight. It is sure that she thought Belgium more French than it was, but she harboured doubts that were later changed to certitudes which she never wanted to confess even to herself. Although in *Villette* she calls Ostend Boue-Marine and Belgium Labassecour, and gives the most grotesque names to the most distinguished members of Brussels society, yet she often says 'French' when she should say 'Belgian,' and accredits the little country with merits which belong absolutely to the greater one, – for example, the skill of its dressmakers. But she did not succeed in deceiving herself, and was secretly vexed at having to accept counterfeit substitutes.

It seems to me extremely probable that her judgment of what she called continental morals and even of Catholicism would have been very different had

she lived in France. Even during those periods when Englishmen have been the most resolutely set against whatever did not correspond to their own ideas and customs, they have never resisted the charm of Paris. And when one is charmed, one is near being persuaded. If Charlotte had been guided only by her literary tact, she would have felt it impossible to attribute shocking faults to a nation excelling in art and in intellect. But it was otherwise with the Belgians, and her ill-humour at finding herself among them, joined to the usual arrogance of the British bourgeois traveller, was freely expressed in her correspondence and later in her books. She had scarcely landed on the *quai* at Ostend when she grew indignant at what she saw and heard, and severity had already appeared in her tone.

The boarding-school whither Mr. Brontë conducted his daughters was called the Héger *Pensionnat*. It was an unpretentious establishment – much less distinguished than the Château de Kockelberg where Mary and Martha Taylor were going – and where the annual expenses, everything included, did not much exceed 650 francs. The Brontës benefited by a reduction in price. The directors of the school were a young woman, Madame Héger-Parent, and her husband, M. Constantin Héger, professor of rhetoric at the Athenæum. They both appear in *Villette*, very differently immortalized. The husband appears to have been an altogether remarkable man in a modest situation. He was thirty-three years old. His first wife had died very soon after their marriage, and he had three children by his second wife. He was an extremely religious man, inspired as a teacher by feelings of the highest duty, who

ended by sacrificing a relatively brilliant professorship at the Athenæum because, as a Catholic, he was not comfortable there. He was widely read in modern literature as well as in that of the seventeenth century, in Christian antiquity and in history. He was a brilliant and fiery professor, not submitting easily to contradiction, but encouraging questions and interesting himself in really developing the minds of his pupils. He was not exempt from the dogmatism inevitably contracted by a superior man who finds himself without rivals in a provincial *milieu*, but as he was naturally very energetic this was less noticeable. He had a lofty and serious mind.

Charlotte, who had never had any other professor, and who had for what she called many times his genius a constantly growing admiration and esteem, at first saw his rare qualities only mingled with his faults. This was her way of judging as long as she stayed in Brussels, and she praised nobody without restraint. 'There is one individual of whom I have not yet spoken,' she wrote toward the end of April to Ellen Nussey, 'M. Héger, the husband of Madame. He is professor of rhetoric, a man of power as to mind, but very choleric and irritable in temperament. A little black being, with a face that varies in expression. Sometimes he borrows the lineaments of an insane tom-cat, sometimes those of a delirious hyena; occasionally, but very seldom, he discards these perilous attractions and assumes an air not above one hundred degrees removed from mild and gentlemanlike.' Tom-cat and hyena are not exactly wicked words, but the superior young Englishwoman is evident in her belief that she knows better than her professor what it means to be well born and well bred.

In future, and on all occasions, this was to be her tendency: to maliciously expose faults and leave merits in the background.

She was now twenty-six years old. Was she tomboyish, or was she beginning to acquire acidity of view-point? I would willingly believe that it was merely an acquired habit, perhaps a softened reflection of Emily's disdain and hauteur. Everybody who knew Charlotte in the early part of her life – later it was different – said that she allowed herself to be easily influenced in small things. Perhaps this tone of paltry criticism was that of her ordinary conversation with her sisters and friends – provincialism, doubtless, but which marred some of her most beautiful pages.

In this same letter we find a brief judgment concerning the directress of the boarding-school: 'Madame Héger is a lady of precisely the same cast of mind, degree of cultivation, and quality of intellect as Miss Catherine Wooler' – (sister of the directress of Roe Head) – 'I think the severe points are a little softened, because she has not been disappointed, and consequently soured. In a word, she is a married, instead of a maiden lady.' When we remember that Miss Wooler and her sisters had been true friends to Charlotte, this comparison seems to show more nicety of judgment than delicacy of feeling.

In the same letter occur these sketches of the three assistant teachers, Mademoiselle Blanche, Mademoiselle Sophie and Mademoiselle Marie. 'The first two have no particular character. One is an old maid, and the other will be one. Mademoiselle Marie is talented and original, but of repulsive and arbitrary manners, which have made the whole school, except myself and Emily, her bitter enemies.'

Here the exception proves the rule and Charlotte defends people as Mrs. Candour does in *The School for Scandal*. Read, too, in *Villette* the description of the honest German woman who gave her lessons, a huge eater who suffered under the deliberate reserve of her pupils: 'In her eyes we were a pair of glacial prodigies, cold, proud and preternatural.'

As to the eighty or ninety scholars among whom Charlotte found herself on the school benches, they were treated still more severely: 'If the national character of the Belgians is to be measured by the character of most of the girls in this school, it is a character singularly cold, selfish, animal, and inferior. They are very mutinous and difficult for the teachers to manage; and their principles are rotten to the core.' In another place she says: 'Most of the scholars are far from having pure souls.' This is her tone: she cuts to the quick with her knife of flint.

Even had the directress, teachers and scholars been congenial to her in other respects, she would never have pardoned them that original vice to which she constantly returned: their Popery. This is how she speaks of it in *Villette*:

'A strange, frolicsome, noisy little world was this school: great pains were taken to hide chains with flowers: a subtle essence of Romanism pervaded every arrangement: large sensual indulgence (so to speak) was permitted by way of counterpoise to jealous spiritual restraint. Each mind was being reared in slavery: but, to prevent reflection from dwelling on this fact, every pretext for physical recreation was seized and made the most of. There, as elsewhere, the CHURCH strove to bring up her

children robust in body, feeble in soul, fat, ruddy, hale, joyous, ignorant, unthinking, unquestioning. 'Eat, drink, and live!' she says. 'Look after your bodies; leave your souls to me. I hold their cure – guide their course: I guarantee their final fate.' A bargain in which every true Catholic deems himself a gainer. Lucifer just offers the same terms: 'All this power will I give thee, and the glory of it; for that is delivered unto me and to whomsoever I will I give it. If thou, therefore, wilt worship me, all shall be thine!'

She was a perfect example of the uncompromising Protestant, not only armed and distrustful but forward and aggressive, a type which the Oxford Movement was in course of suppressing. Only in Newman himself, the Newman of 1832, would the type be as pure. This intransigence, which now seems to us a problem, was the result of an ancient and uninterrupted maceration. Add to this, that the Brontës were the daughters of an Irish Protestant, and that in their education the most favourable conditions had combined to produce a religious sentiment without any alloy. Charlotte was perhaps the last Englishwoman to delight in the idea of heresy and to repeat the word 'heretic' with a wild and provocative joy.

'People talk of the danger which Protestants expose themselves to in going to reside in Catholic countries and thereby running the chance of changing their faith. My advice to all Protestants who are tempted to do anything so besotted as to turn Catholics is, to walk over the sea on to the Continent; to attend Mass sedulously for a time; to note well the mummeries thereof; also the idiotic, mer-

cenary aspect of all the priests; and *then* if they are still disposed to consider Papistry in any other light than a most feeble, childish piece of humbug, let them turn Papists at once – that's all. I consider Methodism, Quakerism, and the extremes of High and Low Churchism foolish, but Roman Catholicism beats them all. At the same time, allow me to tell you that there are some Catholics who are as good as any Christians can be to whom the Bible is a sealed book and much better than many Protestants.'[1]

It is extraordinary that gifted as she was with a rich imagination, fond of ancient things and passionately admiring Walter Scott, Charlotte was not more tolerant of the Catholic ritual as it appeared in a Church like Saint Gudule. She always remained inflexible upon this point. In London many years later she was present at a confirmation service in the Spanish chapel conducted by Cardinal Wiseman. She saw nothing in it but 'theatrical impiety.'

It is unnecessary to say that Emily exhibited the same scorn with even less restraint.

The two sisters eagerly seized every opportunity to be in the company of M. Héger, but were more than indifferent to the rest of the household. 'We avoid them, which is not difficult to do, as we have the brand of Protestantism and Anglicism upon us.' During the recreation hours they walked together in the garden alleys, Emily leaning on Charlotte's arm and not speaking for hours together. Emily had remained faithful to the hideous fashion of the formless narrow skirt and leg-of-mutton sleeves, and must have presented a strange appearance.

[1] This letter was written to Ellen Nussey.

There were four or five other English girls in the *pension*, who were also Protestant. Charlotte became interested in one of them, Miss Lætitia Wheelwright, through observing one day the air of disdain with which she regarded her companions. 'It was so English,' Charlotte said.

When they were free to go out, the Brontës went to see their friends the Taylors at the Château of Kockelberg. They also had letters of introduction to two English families, the Dixons and the Jenkins. Mrs. Jenkins was the wife of the English clergyman, and she invited the Brontës as long as she was sure that her invitations did not give them less pleasure than embarrassment. Emily only spoke in monosyllables, and though Charlotte was sometimes animated, she was more often paralysed by her timidity, moved restlessly on her chair and little by little turned away from her interlocutor.

It seems that they entered very soon into perfect intellectual understanding with M. Héger, which innumerable differences of opinion never succeeded in troubling. This clever master divined almost at once the extraordinary ability of his pupils, and mutual confidence was established between them. If we had nothing but the impressions the Brontës had of M. Héger, and his memories of them, it would seem that their sojourn in Brussels must have been perfectly happy, and that Charlotte's ideas about the Belgians, their character and their religion, must have been aimless whims.

M. Héger found Emily an exacting and selfish sister, an obstinate and headstrong pupil. Even with Charlotte he was often on a warlike footing; and it would seem, judging from the many details of the

portrait of Monsieur Paul in *Villette*, that he was sufficiently hot-headed and obstinate himself to hold these Yorkshire girls in check. But he appreciated them. He placed Emily above her elder sister, and had no doubt of her genius. Her powerful capacity for reasoning astounded him. He said one day that she had enough logic and indomitable courage to have made a great navigator, another Christopher Columbus. And she had enough imagination 'to impose on the minds of others a scene or characters exactly as she wished to create them.'

M. Héger had begun teaching them French by the classic method of grammatical exercises, themes and translations; but after a few weeks he gave this up and adopted a plan worthy of a great teacher and an artist in education. He had noticed that his two pupils wrote more correctly when they did not translate. He forbade them in future to translate, to look at a dictionary or trouble themselves with grammar. He read them parallel passages from authors who had different points of view – for instance, Bossuet's and Guizot's portraits of Cromwell – and made them amalgamate the two according to their own ideas. But upon Emily declaring that this exercise deprived her of all originality of thought and expression, he at once agreed with her and made them compose, by the same method, imitations of their own choice. After reading Victor Hugo's portrait of Mirabeau, Charlotte wrote a sketch of Peter the Hermit just before the Crusades, and Emily a portrait of Harold before the Battle of Hastings. Their progress was prodigiously rapid. These exercises are surprising in their maturity of thought, but above all by their extraordinary mastery of a language which, only a

few months earlier, Charlotte knew little about and Emily still less.

Charlotte often selected her characters from the Bible, of which she had the most minute knowledge, while Emily took hers from the history of England.

In this way they read with M. Héger a considerable number of extracts from the best French literature. He professed to care only for the classics, but often betrayed a secret tenderness for contemporary writers. Mrs. Gaskell cites Casimir Delavigne, Victor Hugo and Vigny – the latter very acutely criticized. She also notes in the literary criticism of the two disciples the repetition of offensive attacks of Protestantism which in the end become fatiguing. These young fanatics go too far.

Early in her sojourn at Brussels Emily had shown symptoms of her old nostalgia, but she dare not succumb to them when such important interests were at stake, and this time she triumphed. Even in those letters in which Charlotte speak most freely of her hostility against her *milieu*, she admits that she and her sister were happy. 'My present life is so delightful,' she wrote, 'so congenial to my own nature, compared with that of a governess. My time, constantly occupied, passes too rapidly.' And again, towards the end of her first visit, 'I don't deny I sometimes wish to be in England, or that I have brief attacks of home-sickness . . . but I have been happy in Brussels, because I have always been fully occupied with the employments that I like.'

They accepted, therefore, without much hesitation Madame Héger's invitation, given just before the long vacation, to stay on another half-year, Charlotte as teacher of English and Emily to give a few

piano lessons. For the first time they sacrificed their vacation at Haworth without too much regret. They passed their six weeks of liberty in studying and exploring the country, Charlotte being very fond of the environs of Brussels. A passage in *Villette* leaves no doubt that she also went frequently to the Museum, which was already rich. She describes in her magnificent language the struggle in her mind between the orthodox tendency to admire what we are told is admirable and the imperious need she felt to keep her judgment free. Herself an artist, she ended, as a good romanticist, by repeating that an excellent picture is as rare as an excellent book, and by applying to art the tests of literature.

She thought little of the Dutch painters, wrongly calling them Flemings, and regarded their work with disdain, as painting fit for fashion plates.

The end of this agreeable vacation was tragic. Martha Taylor, a gay, charming girl (the Jessy Yorke of *Shirley*), died so suddenly that Charlotte arrived too late at the Château of Kockelberg. She had scarcely recovered from this shock, and the pupils of the Héger *pension* had hardly returned, when a letter came from Mr. Brontë summoning his daughters to the death-bed of their aunt. They departed in haste, but Haworth was far away, and when they reached there Miss Branwell was already buried, and Anne and Mr. Brontë received the travellers alone in the sad and orderly home.

This event was a thunderstroke. Anne had a situation with excellent people where at last she was happy and where Branwell had joined her. If she could not remain at Haworth, it was evidently neces-

sary that one of the other sisters should do so. Charlotte and Emily must have re-read more than once with swelling heart a passage in the beautiful and touching letter Monsieur Héger had confided to them for their father when he bade them good-bye:

'. . . In losing our two dear pupils, we must not conceal from you that we are both grieved and troubled, grieved because this sudden separation wounds the almost paternal affection we feel for them, and our pain is increased by the sight of so much work interrupted, so many things well begun which required only a little more time to be successfully completed. In a year, each of your young ladies would have been entirely prepared for the future, each of them would have received not only their own instruction but the science of teaching; Miss Emily was to study the piano, and receive lessons from the best professor we have in Belgium – and she already had little pupils of her own; she would thus have lost what remains of her ignorance and, at the same time, more embarrassing still, what remains of her timidity; Miss Charlotte was beginning to give lessons in French and to acquire that assurance, that self-possession so necessary in a teacher. Another year, at most, and the work would have been finished. Then, if you had wished it, we should have been able to offer to your daughters, or at least to one of them, a position in accordance with her taste, and which would have afforded her that sweet independence so difficult for a young person to achieve. . . .'

There was not a sentence in this letter which did not show the attachment felt by Monsieur and Madame Héger for their young friends, and which

did not at the same time evoke visions of the future which they had most desired.

After a few weeks of uncertainty, and – if we may believe an enigmatic avowal made by Charlotte, to which I shall refer later – after a painful struggle against certain presentiments, it was decided that the elder daughter should return to Brussels. At the beginning of January, 1843, she was once more with the Hégers after three months' absence.

This second sojourn must have been very different from the first. Charlotte felt much more lonely and less independent. Monsieur Héger continued to be as attentive and kind as he had been, and went on teaching Charlotte, while she in return gave him a few English lessons. He would have liked her to feel at home in his wife's little sitting-room, and he took her to see the Carnival. Madame Héger was also kind. But Charlotte was now extremely busy, and besides her classes was superintendent of one division of the school. She was also more solitary, missing the companionship of Emily, the Taylors and the Dixons, who had just left Brussels. The Wheelwrights were very young and were only day scholars.

Miss Brontë was now called simply 'Miss' by everybody, and was naturally thrown much into the company of the three other teachers, of whom we remember her impression. For some time she seemed to be contented. On March 6 she wrote a letter in which she appeared to be satisfied with everything, and spoke in favourable terms not only of Monsieur Héger but also of his wife. A month later she was melancholy, and complained of her solitude.

'There are privations and humiliations to submit to; there is monotony and uniformity of life; and, above

all, there is a constant sense of solitude in the midst of numbers. The Protestant, the foreigner, is a solitary being, whether as teacher or pupil. I do not say this by way of complaining of my own lot; for though I acknowledge that there are certain disadvantages in my present position, what position on earth is without them? And whenever I turn back to compare what I am with what I was – my place here with my place at Mrs. (Sidgwick's or Mrs. White's) – I am thankful.'

Towards the end of May she wrote a letter to Emily which explains itself and shows a marked increase in melancholy.

'You will perceive I have begun again to take German lessons' (at ten francs a month from a certain Fräulein Mühl). 'Things wag on much as usual here. Only Mademoiselle Blanche and Mademoiselle Haussé are at present on a system of war without quarter. They hate each other like two cats. Mademoiselle Blanche frightens Mademoiselle Haussé by her white passions (for they quarrel venomously). Mademoiselle Haussé complains that when Mademoiselle Blanche is in a rage "her lips disappear." I find also that Mademoiselle Sophie dislikes Mademoiselle Blanche extremely. She says she is heartless, insincere and vindictive, which epithets, I assure you, are richly deserved. Also I find she is the regular spy of Madame Héger, to whom she reports everything. Also she invents – which I should not have thought. . . . I am richly off for companionship in these parts. Of late days M. and Mme Héger rarely speak to me, and I really don't pretend to care a fig for anybody else in the establishment. You are not to suppose by that expression that I am under the

influence of *warm* affection for Mme Héger. I am convinced that she does not like me – why, I can't tell, nor do I think she herself has any definite reason for the aversion; but, for one thing, she cannot comprehend why I do not make intimate friends of Mesdames Blanche, Sophie and Haussé. M. Héger is wondrously influenced by Madame, and I should not wonder if he disapproves very much of my unamiable want of sociability. He has already given me a brief lecture on universal *bienveillance*, and, perceiving that I don't improve in consequence, I fancy he has taken to considering me as a person to be let alone, left to the error of her ways; and consequently he has in a great measure withdrawn the light of his countenance, and I get on from day to day in a Robinson-Crusoe-like condition – very lonely. That does not signify. In other respects I have nothing substantial to complain of, nor is even this a cause for complaint. Except for the loss of M. Héger's goodwill (if I have lost it) I care for none of 'em.'

This is the first time she distinctly complained of Mme Héger. In another letter, written about the same time, she calls her specious and politic. This was also her first allusion to the spying which she uses with marvellous cleverness all through *Villette*. Here we find the first line drawn of this powerful and probably very unjust portrait.

What had happened? It is difficult to say, and it is unfortunate that these small things loom large in the lives of celebrated authors. However, one of the possible reasons has some importance, and makes it worth while to examine more closely into what may have occurred.

It is certain that until the summer of 1843 Charlotte had had nothing but praise for the behaviour of Madame Héger. A letter written in October that same year, which I shall have occasion to quote, expressly repeats this fact. But Madame Héger was very pious, and Charlotte was very Protestant. When Miss Brontë became a professor, with more influence over the scholars, it would have been strange had Madame Héger taken no interest in what she might say to them. We can infer from a passage in *Villette* that Charlotte did not always remember that as a teacher she had taken on new responsibility.

'In an unguarded moment, I chanced to say that, of the two errors, I considered falsehood worse than an occasional lapse in church-attendance. The poor girls were tutored to report in Catholic ears whatever the Protestant teacher said. An edifying consequence ensued. Something – an unseen, an indefinite, a nameless something – stole between myself and these my best pupils. . . . Conversation thenceforth became impracticable. As I paced the alleys or sat in the *berceau*, a girl never came to my right hand but a teacher, as if by magic, appeared at my left. Also, wonderful to relate, Madame's shoes of silence brought her continually to my back, as quick, as noiseless and unexpected, as some wandering zephyr.'

We also have Charlotte's avowal that she did not get on very well with the other teachers, or at least, that she betrayed little taste for their company. This attitude must have increased the discord already existing among these belligerent persons, and could not have been welcome to the directress. It seems,

indeed, that Charlotte found it difficult in daily life to put herself in the place of her neighbour. She had, besides, and in spite of her energy, an aversion for uniformity – one might perhaps say discipline – of which she was herself conscious. Some time later she wrote to a friend: 'Do you ever get dissatisfied with your own temper when you are long fixed to one place, in one scene, subject to one monotonous species of annoyance?' If we may suppose, then, that she was careless of what she said, manifested disdain for her colleagues and appeared melancholy and ready to take offence, it is easy to understand the decline in Madame Héger's cordiality.

But there is another possible reason which would enable us to dispense with all the others, and which must be briefly discussed. Was Madame Héger jealous of Charlotte? Had Charlotte a more or less acknowledged feeling for Monsieur Héger? It is evident that upon this point we can only make use of *Villette* with extreme precaution. In this novel, Lucy, that is to say, Charlotte, is in love with Monsieur Paul, who is no other than M. Héger; and Madame Beck, the terrible incarnation of Mme Héger, is among other things, a little jealous of Lucy, and nothing in all Charlotte Brontë's work seems so actually true as Lucy, M. Paul and their sentimental relations. But the novel is so full of details that do not fit in with reality that we cannot make use of those that do. Charlotte took the framework and the characters of her book from her Brussels memories, but, for the rest, she allowed herself all the liberty of which she was capable. We must fall back, therefore, upon evidence and documents.

Not a word in Charlotte's correspondence permits

the supposition that she was in love with her master.[1] She speaks of him in many places with admiration and even, possibly, with affection; but there is not a shade of meaning or rhythm in these letters, that say so marvellously what they wish to say, which does not conform entirely with her position as a grateful and confiding pupil. Of this there is a rather striking example in a letter to Ellen Nussey. The latter had written her that people attributed sentimental reasons to her sojourn in Brussels. Charlotte defends herself with the familiar and rugged energy which characterizes her letters to her friend:

'If these charitable people knew the total seclusion of the life I lead – that I never exchange a word with any other man than Monsieur Héger, and seldom indeed with him – they would, perhaps, cease to suppose that any such chimerical and groundless notion had influenced my proceedings. Have I said enough to clear myself of so silly an imputation? Not that it is a crime to marry, or a crime to wish to be married; but it is an imbecility, which I reject with contempt, for women, who have neither fortune nor beauty, to make marriage the principal object of their wishes and hopes. . . .'

If she had felt a secret attachment for M. Héger, would she have introduced his name in such self-defence? If we study every line of her correspondence in which she refers to her master, in an effort to discover the truth, if we strive to read between the lines, we are constantly disarmed by this same simplicity. The more she was crushed by the weight of solitude, the oftener she repeated that the Hégers alone made life bearable for her in Brussels. 'On

[1] See Appendix.

holidays . . . the silence and loneliness of all the house weighs down one's spirits like lead. You will hardly believe that Madame Héger (good and kind as I have described her[1]), never comes near me on these occasions. I own I was astonished the first time I was left alone thus; when everybody else was enjoying the pleasures of a fête day with their friends, and she knew I was quite by myself. . . . Yet, I understand, she praises me very much to everybody, and says what excellent lessons I give. She is not colder to me than she is to the other teachers, but they are less dependent on her than I am. . . . You remember the letter she wrote me when I was in England? How kind and affectionate that was! is it not odd? In the meantime the complaints I make at present are a sort of relief which I permit myself.' This letter was dated October 13. In it she also tells how, shortly before, being at the end of her endurance she went to the directress and asked for her release. 'If it had depended on her I should certainly have soon been at liberty; but M. Héger, having heard of what was in agitation, sent for me the day after, and pronounced with vehemence his decision, that I should not leave. I could not, at that time, have persevered in my intention without exciting him to anger; so I promised to stay a little while longer.'

Such was the situation two months before Charlotte's departure. Mme Héger was correct and cold. Her husband continued to manifest the same interest in his pupil, but, evidently under the influence of his wife, practically saw her no more. No appearance can be found of the existence of the slightest intrigue

[1] Mr. Shorter finds this parenthesis ironical; but the contrary is evident in the context.

between Charlotte and M. Héger. But Madame Héger? It is necessary to understand clearly her state of mind.

Proofs exist that she was jealous. Fourteen years after Charlotte had left Brussels she refused to see Mrs. Gaskell who had come to seek information for her Life of Miss Brontë, and she and her daughters consistently maintained, making no secret of it, that Charlotte had been in love with M. Héger. At this time *Villette* had appeared, Mme Héger had found herself unpleasantly famous over night, and it cannot be denied that the novel itself tended to convince her that Charlotte had been ungrateful and had acted in reality as Lucy acts in the book. But we have older testimony than this. Miss Lætitia Wheelwright says that Charlotte and M. Héger continued to correspond for several years – one of Miss Brontë's letters to be quoted later on will show the tone of the correspondence – but that as Mme Héger was displeased the husband asked Charlotte to address her letters to the Athenæum. After this the proud Englishwoman ceased to write. The Héger ladies said, on their part, that Charlotte had written in a manner which it had been necessary to ask her to alter, and that this had brought about the rupture. Miss Wheelwright's testimony is evidently more reliable, and it remains that Mme Héger, very angry at the author of *Villette* during the second part of her life, had, in the first part, already taken umbrage at the very apparent pleasure that Charlotte – Protestant, cultured, original and excessively interesting to an intelligent man – had taken in the society of her husband. It has never been said by anybody that the peace of the household had ever been troubled.

In a letter written to Ellen Nussey in 1846 we find the following passage:

'. . . Whenever I consult my conscience, it affirms that I am doing right in staying at home, and bitter are its upbraidings when I yield to an eager desire for release. . . . I returned to Brussels after aunt's death against my conscience, prompted by what seemed then an irresistible impulse. I was punished for my selfish folly by a total hindrance for more than two years of happiness and peace of mind.'

These words have been supposed to bear upon the separation from M. Héger, though, on the other hand, Miss Nussey has always declared that they refer to an entirely different cause for grief. [During the absence of his daughter Mr. Brontë had begun to drink.] It is not necessary to attach any precise meaning to this avowal of Charlotte's. We shall see that she returned to Haworth in the same ruinous condition as when she came back from Roe Head, and found there all sorts of new anxieties. It is probable that the troubles of which she speaks in such general terms were of more than one kind and as ill-defined as the presentiments and the irresistible impulse against which she had struggled. It is probable that Charlotte dreamed for a long time with regret of the time when she daily saw M. Héger, her friend and her guide: to go farther is to indulge fancy. Charlotte's subconscious mind, as we catch glimpses of it in her novels and poems, is an ocean upon which one hesitates to venture. To say that in her the woman and the author were two distinct and even opposed beings – as the mystic and the man in saints – does not assuredly furnish the key to her singular

nature, but it supplies a formula which strengthens the more we study it.

The last months of her stay in Brussels became more and more sad. She had decided not to leave until she had mastered German, and for some time this definite object sustained her courage, but as vacation drew near and she saw herself menaced with deeper solitude, she lost heart.

'. . . Earth and heaven are dreary and empty to me at this moment. In a few days our vacation will begin; everybody is joyous and animated at the prospect, because everybody is to go home. I know that I am to stay here during the five weeks that the holidays last, and that I shall be much alone during that time, and consequently get downcast, and find both days and nights of a weary length. It is the first time in my life that I have really dreaded the vacation. Alas! I can hardly write, I have such a dreary weight at my heart.'

The vacation came, the house became empty and the terrors she had dreaded invaded her. She slept alone in a great empty dormitory, where her bed was assailed by black shadows. In the daytime she wandered about the streets until her strength gave out, only returning to the *pensionnat* when night compelled her. One evening, exhausted, and suffering mentally more than ever, she found herself in front of Sainte Gudule church and entered it. The Benediction service was being sung. At the end she stayed on in the church, and observed six or seven people who seemed to be waiting in one of the chapels. She came nearer, and saw a priest in a confessional. In her extreme distress the desire took pos-

session of her to make a true confession as if she were a Catholic, to see what effect it would have upon her.

'Knowing me as you do,' she wrote Emily, 'you will think this odd, but when people are by themselves they have singular fancies. . . . After I had watched two or three penitents go and return I approached at last and knelt down. . . . On the other side was another penitent, invisible to me. At last that went away and a little wooden door inside the grating opened, and I saw the priest leaning his ear towards me. I was obliged to begin, and yet I did not know a word of the formula. . . . It was a funny position. . . . I commenced with saying I was a foreigner and had been brought up as a Protestant. The priest asked if I was a Protestant then. I somehow could not tell a lie and said "Yes." He replied that in that case I could not have the joy of confessing; but I was determined to confess, and at last he said he would allow me, because it might be the first step towards returning to the true Church. I actually did confess – a real confession. When I had done he told me his address, and said that every morning I was to go to the Rue du Parc – to his house – and he would reason with me and try to convince me of the error and enormity of being a Protestant! ! ! I promised faithfully to go. Of course, however, the adventure stops there, and I hope I shall never see the priest again. I think you had better not tell papa of this. He will not understand that it was only a freak, and will perhaps think I am going to turn Catholic.'

The tone she uses at the end of this recital does not accord with the scene: we would rather think that

Charlotte was, in these rather solemn circumstances, entirely at one with her principles and habits of complete sincerity.

She must indeed have been terribly disheartened to have succumbed to the attraction of the confessional. A few more days of this objectless struggle reduced her to the same condition in which she had fallen six years earlier at Miss Wooler's, and one morning she was unable to leave the solitary dormitory. This was fortunate in the end. A kind woman took care of her, and the repose she was thus obliged to take restored sufficient strength to enable her to resume her work. But nothing could give back to her the peaceful happiness which had made her first sojourn delicious. Her letters are no longer mournful and plaintive, but full of visions of her cold little mountainous fatherland now become as attractive as Paradise.

In December she made a pretext of her father's condition – his eye troubles becoming worse – to announce her early departure. She was surprised to find her pupils infinitely more sympathetic than she had supposed them, and all grieved at the prospect of her leaving them. She left Brussels on New Year's Eve and arrived at Haworth on January 2, 1844. M. Héger had given her a kind of diploma, bearing the seal of the Athenæum, and testifying that she had made a profound study of French and was capable of teaching it. A few weeks after her return she wrote: 'I suffered much before I left Brussels. I think, however long I live, I shall not forget what the parting with M. Héger cost me; it grieved me so much to grieve him, who has been so true, kind, and disinterested a friend.'

CHAPTER NINE

★

Branwell and Anne were at Haworth for the vacation when Charlotte arrived and their reunion was a great joy. Anne and her brother had been together for some time in the house of a rich clergyman, and they congratulated themselves on this fortunate arrangement. After Christmas they went off again, and Charlotte was left with Emily, Mr. Brontë and old Tabby. The latter was now nearly eighty years old and Mr. Brontë nearly seventy. Both of them were becoming blind and required constant care.

During the fifteen or eighteen months which followed her return, Charlotte seems to have retreated within herself, struggling feebly against her ill-fortune and ridding herself, one by one, of all her illusions. The courage without hope and a kind of jesting without gaiety which had characterized her letters up to this time now gave place to a mournful resignation not without a quality of greatness, for it would seem that in proportion as she expected less from life she became more conscious of herself, and this transformation passed into her language, which acquired constantly more precision and nobleness. Emily was continually with her, and as soon as spring came they resumed their walks on the moors, but Emily's influence over her was diminished. The childish inexperience which was as much characteristic of Emily as her indomitable firmness had ceased to be contagious.

For months the two sisters continued to discuss their plans for opening a school, but the obstacles in their way appeared more than ever insurmountable, and sometimes it would seem as if they only wished

to deceive themselves. They hesitated a long time before ordering the printing of the poor little prospectus which remains one of the most touching souvenirs in what is called the 'museum' of Haworth. They wished first to be sure of at least *one* pupil. At last Charlotte decided to write to Mrs. White, not to ask her to send her daughter – such boldness was quite beyond her strength – but to tell her that she was still thinking of opening a boarding school. Mrs. White replied. Three weeks earlier she could not only have confided her own daughter to the Misses Brontë, but would have sent them Colonel Stott's daughter as well: both were now promised to a certain Miss Corkhills. Charlotte then had the prospectus printed and timidly sent it to five or six persons. No replies came. Before long she began to be afraid lest pupils should arrive. She had always had a horror of the churchyard, which was so near that it seemed to besiege the house; Haworth was cold and sad, the water was bad. She imagined a mother arriving with her daughter at the parsonage, taking stock of the place and departing in indignation.

The summer vacation brought a new cause for apprehension. Anne and Branwell came home, and Branwell seemed extraordinary and incomprehensible. He appeared to be discontented at home and in haste to return to the Robinsons; sometimes in extravagantly high spirits, sometimes crushed, he spoke enigmatically and accused himself of treason which he did not explain. At Christmas he was somewhat more calm, but they had scarcely returned to Thorp Green when Anne began to send letters full of anxiety and vague suspicions. Evidently her

brother was behaving in a strange manner, and the disapproval of Mr. Robinson, long threatened, now began to be openly expressed.

Little by little, confusedly, the poor girls began to realize that the unhappy boy would keep none of his promises. They dreaded seeing him come home some day, not only to live at their expense but hinder all their efforts. What would be the fate of a boarding-school where the pupils would come in daily contact with a young man of twenty-six of doubtful reputation?

Early in 1845, Mary Taylor arrived to say goodbye to her friend before expatriating herself. She was a woman of an independent and venturesome nature, who applied her bold political and religious ideas to her daily life. She had always dreamed of a life less placid than that which England assures, but monotonously, to women of her class. Her sister's death at Brussels, and money losses, had caused her decision to seek her fortune at the Antipodes. She was about to sail for New Zealand.

She found Charlotte discouraged, wavering and nervous. She, on the contrary, was full of her newformed resolution and the romantic prospect of a two months' voyage, under strange stars, across the largest ocean in the world. She pitied her friend, and told her it was madness and suicide to stay in this hole of a Haworth. 'Think of what you will be five years from now,' she said. Miss Brontë's face became so sad that Mary exclaimed, ' Don't cry, Charlotte.' She did not cry, but began to walk up and down the room. Presently she said, 'But I intend to stay, Polly.'

In March she wrote to this same friend:

'I can hardly tell you how time gets on at Haworth. There is no event whatever to mark its progress. One day resembles another; and all have heavy, lifeless physiognomies. Sunday, baking day, and Saturday are the only ones that have any distinctive mark. Meantime life wears away. I shall soon be thirty; and I have done nothing yet. . . . Undoubtedly my duty directs me to stay at home for the present. There was a time when Haworth was a very pleasant place to me ; it is not so now. I feel as if we were all buried here. I long to travel; to work, to live a life of action . . . fruitless wishes!'

One sentence in this letter makes it clear that her taste for producing and a confused aspiration towards glory still lived in her, but everything eternally conspired to throw her far from the object that attracted her. Her weakened state of health had reacted upon her eyesight, which had never been strong, and what small service she could exact from her eyes was consecrated to her father. She wrote to M. Héger in her firm and supple French which was quite superior to her master's:

'There is nothing I dread so much as idleness, inertia, lethargy of the faculties. When the body is lazy, the mind suffers cruelly. I should not experience this lethargy if I could write. Formerly, I passed days, weeks, entire months writing, and not altogether without result, since Southey and Coleridge, two of our best writers, to whom I sent some manuscripts, were kind enough to express their approbation; but at present my sight is very poor, and if I wrote much I should become blind. For me this weakness of sight is a terrible deprivation. If it

were not for that, do you know what I should do, Sir? I should write a book and dedicate it to my literature master, to the only master I have ever had, to you, Sir. I have often told you in French how much I respect you, how much I am indebted to your goodness, to your advice. I should like to say it once in English. But this cannot be, and I must not think of it. A literary career is closed to me. . . . Do not forget to tell me how you are, how Madame and the children are. I count upon having news from you soon: the idea seems very agreeable to me, for the memory of all your kindness will never be effaced from my mind, and as long as this memory lasts, the respect you have inspired in me will last also.'

A few months later, her health improved and, with her mind less depressed, she prepared to write the book which doubtless she had felt was taking form in her imagination. This book was *The Professor*, which, not welcomed by publishers, was to be transformed into *Villette*, and in this second version was indeed a seductive portrait of M. Héger, while also a terrible satire of his wife. Charlotte saw everything black, and, almost on the point of beginning her novel, despaired of ever being able to write.

Her nervousness must often have been evident in impatience. It was the only period of her life in which she yielded to not vivacity, which was not natural to her, but an abruptness which was sarcastic and bitter, and which she suppressed with difficulty. Read this little picture done in her best style:

'I have no desire at all to see your curate. I think he must be like all the other curates I have seen and

they seem to me a self-seeking, vain, empty race. At this blessed moment we have no less than three of them in Haworth Parish – and there is not one to mend another. The other day they all three, accompanied by Mr. Smith, of whom, by the way, I have grievous things to tell you, dropped, or rather rushed in unexpectedly to tea. It was Monday (baking day) and I was hot and tired; still, if they had behaved quietly and decently, I would have served them out their tea in peace; but they began glorifying themselves and abusing Dissenters in such a manner that my temper lost its balance, and I pronounced a few sentences sharply and rapidly, which struck them all dumb. Papa was greatly horrified also, but I don't regret it.'

There was to be nothing better than that even in *Shirley*, which might be called the scourge or maul of curates.

It is remarkable that Mr. Nicholls, Charlotte's future husband, came in for his share of this general reprobation. When it was rumoured by Haworth gossip that he might possibly become Mr. Brontë's son-in-law, Charlotte wrote:

'I scarcely need say that never was rumour more unfounded. A cold, far-away sort of civility are the only terms on which I have ever been with Mr. Nicholls. I could by no means think of mentioning such a rumour to him even as a joke. It would make me the laughing-stock of himself and his fellow curates for half a year to come. They regard me as an old maid, and I regard them, one and all, as highly uninteresting, narrow, and unattractive specimens of the coarser sex.'

These merciless executions are of frequent occurrence in her novels. Mildness is not a characteristic Brontë virtue.

During this period of unbroken sadness, Charlotte seized with avidity every possible occasion to vary the monotony of her existence. Her friend Ellen took her to Hathersage where her brother, the Rev. Henry Nussey, who had formerly been interested in Charlotte, had just arrived. He had been recently married. This three weeks' visit to her friend was beneficial to Charlotte. On her way back to Haworth an interesting incident occurred. She met a Frenchman on the train, and as she was losing the habit of speaking French, she was glad of this opportunity. Her ear was sufficiently sensitive to cause the suspicion that the traveller had lived in Germany, and this surmise proved correct.

It was now the beginning of July, the time of longest days in the North. She reached Haworth at ten o'clock in the evening and found everybody in a state of consternation. Branwell had unexpectedly arrived, looking ill. Almost simultaneously with his arrival he had received a letter from Mr. Robinson, warning him that his actions had been discovered, applying the most harsh names to him, and saying that henceforth and for ever he was to cease all communication with any member of his family.

This mystery must be explained. Mr. Robinson was married to a woman much younger than himself, who was, however, nearly twenty years older than Branwell. She had fallen in love with the young tutor, things must have gone very far, and Branwell had succumbed to the violence of an insane passion. This was the cause of his incomprehensible be-

haviour during the last vacation, and the frightened and mysterious letters which Anne had written home after their return to Thorp Green. Branwell's discharge in these circumstances was a catastrophe in his life as in that of his old father and his sisters. It definitely marked the beginning of his degradation. For a time his excitement seemed dangerous, and it became necessary to decide to send him away and have him guarded. This measure was effective, and he wrote a letter full of repentance to Charlotte. We find another letter of the same kind in his correspondence with Engineer Grundy, but these were the last lucid moments of a nature that had been richly endowed. 'My brilliant and unhappy son,' Mr. Brontë was to write ten years after his death; but from this time on he was only the unhappy Branwell. For three long years his dissolute drunkenness, then his passion for opium, his fury followed by stupor, his monomaniacal ruses for procuring money or whisky, his silly or wicked lies, his horror of work, were to form the lugubrious background of life ~~for the solitary family at Haworth. Branwell had been their idol; he now became not only their shame but their torment. Charlotte's letters allude to him as an invalid already condemned~~, an unfortunate being to whom death came but slowly. 'Branwell a little better. Branwell very bad.' Sometimes when they thought him without money, and entered his room to speak to him, they found him intoxicated. From his childhood he had slept in his father's room : often, as a good-night to his sisters, he told them that either he or the old man would be dead before morning. Or else his first words on coming down to the kitchen in the morning would

be, 'The old man and I have had a rough night. He does what he can, the old man, but as for me, I am done for.'

About two years later Mr. Robinson died. Branwell had always said in his periods of excitement, and Anne had seemed to believe, that in case of this event he would marry the widow. But a rumour – expressly mentioned in one of Charlotte's letters – spread that Mr. Robinson had foreseen this possibility, and had disinherited his wife in case of her remarriage. In fact, though Anne's pupils, the Misses Robinson, came to Haworth to visit their former teacher, their mother never approached Branwell in any way.[1] She soon settled in London, moving in the most brilliant fashionable as well as charitable society, and her name was frequently mentioned, with respect, in the newspapers.

[1] This disagreeable story was related from beginning to end, with rare courage, by Mrs. Gaskell in the first edition of her *Life of Charlotte Brontë*. The names of the people concerned were designated by initials; nevertheless, a suit was brought against Mrs. Gaskell, which she lost. Through her lawyer she was obliged to make a public apology to Mrs. Robinson, and to suppress or entirely transform her written account of the affair. She did so, but without conviction. Henceforth, the version given out, and accepted favourably by that marvellous convention then known as British respectability, was as follows: (1) Mrs. Gaskell had been substantially mistaken, since Mr. Robinson's will contained no reference to the second marriage of his wife. (2) The whole story was the product of Branwell's diseased brain.

The following important points tend to refute these frail theses: (1) Anne, who also lived with the Robinsons, never had any doubts of Branwell's assertions. (2) The letter written by Charlotte, already mentioned, proves that it was believed, *on all sides*, that Mrs. Robinson had been forbidden by her husband to remarry.

It cannot be doubted that there was, at least, a scandal in the countryside.

Little by little Charlotte resigned herself to seeing her life spoiled and wasted. One thing she had which nothing could take away from her, her indomitable courage and her consciousness of having always made a struggle. This at least she felt would never fail her, and she saw in it a distant but sure reward. This melancholy hope of a soul brave to the point of heroism fills a letter written to Miss Wooler, in which she speaks first of the support she finds in her sister's love, and of the uselessness of expecting Branwell's recovery:

'You ask me if I do not think that men are strange beings. I do, indeed. I have often thought so; and I think, too, that the mode of bringing them up is strange: they are not sufficiently guarded from temptation. Girls are protected as if they were something very frail and silly indeed, while boys are turned loose on the world, as if they, of all beings in existence, were the wisest and least liable to be led astray. I am glad you like Bromsgrove, though, I dare say, there are few places you would *not* like with Mrs. M. for a companion. I always feel a peculiar satisfaction when I hear of your enjoying yourself, because it proves that there really is such a thing as retributive justice even in this world. You worked hard; you denied yourself all pleasure, almost all relaxation, in your youth, and in the prime of life; now you are free, and that while you have still, I hope, many years of vigour and health in which you can enjoy freedom. Besides, I have another and very egotistical motive for being pleased; it seems that even "a lone woman" can be happy, as well as cherished wives and proud mothers. I am

glad of that. I speculate much on the existence of unmarried and never-to-be-married women nowadays; and I have already got to the point of considering that there is no more respectable character on this earth than an unmarried woman, who makes her own way through life quietly, perseveringly, without support of husband or brother; and who, having attained the age of forty-five or upwards, retains in her possession a well-regulated mind, a disposition to enjoy simple pleasures, and fortitude to support inevitable pains, sympathy with the sufferings of others, and willingness to relieve want as far as her means extend.'

This, I believe, was a sincere expression of her feeling, for at the time when she wrote this letter she had already refused two offers of marriage, and was to refuse two more.

She also wrote as follows to Ellen Nussey, who was much bored at home and looked wistfully toward the outer world:

'I will tell you what is my earnest conviction on the subject. . . . The right path is that which necessitates the greatest sacrifice of self-interest – which implies the greatest good to others; and this path, steadily followed, will lead, I believe, in time, to prosperity and happiness, though it may seem, at the outset, to tend quite in a contrary direction. . . . If your mother is more composed when you are with her, stay with her. . . . You will not be praised and admired for remaining at home to comfort your mother; yet, probably, your own conscience will approve. . . . I recommend you to do what I am trying to do myself.'

During this sad autumn of 1843 an apparently insignificant incident occurred which was not only to change the lives of the Brontë sisters but to materialize ideas which up till then had been chimerical.

Outside of their association in the work and business of the household, they lived their lives independently of each other. This is not surprising. Eugénie de Guérin did not show her copy-books to her sister Mimi. The English Brontës, northern country girls, somewhat resembled the rather rugged daughters of French provincial families who cherish their own secret projects without loving one another any the less. Emily and Anne had some confidential relations, but Charlotte never questioned them. One day she accidentally found the copy-book in which Emily wrote her poems, and read them. These simple but significant verses astonished her, and she said so to her sister. Emily was offended at what she considered this indelicacy, and it required hours to appease her. Anne, usually silent and placid, said to Charlotte that as she liked Emily's verse she might perhaps like hers, too; whereupon she produced not only a copy-book of verse, but clippings from magazines which had sometimes published her work. In presence of all these manuscripts Charlotte conceived the idea that perhaps Emily's poems would be attractive enough to carry along the others, and the prospect of publication took possession of the sisters' minds. They soon resolved to appear together before the public, cost what it might.

CHAPTER TEN

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CHARLOTTE was now thirty, Emily twenty-eight and Anne twenty-six years old. According to the eldest sister, who served as chronicler to the whole family, they had till now done nothing. In fact, they were unknown, not only to the public but to everybody except three or four people who were aware of their aspirations and saw them champing the bit. And what impression do they make upon us, now spectators of their lives? I have already mentioned Eugénie de Guérin, because the comparison comes naturally to the mind. To which side would our sympathies be drawn? Where would our thoughts turn if left to themselves? Would it not always be towards the charming sister of all Christian, dreaming souls? How open and welcoming does the Cayla look alongside the Haworth parsonage! How much less heavy is its sadness! How full-coloured is the prose of its daily existence, instead of being dull and grey! Some charm transfigures the least actions as it does the least words of Eugénie. What was this charm we have no need to ask of Matthew Arnold, who felt it very distinctly, however: the Catholic religion, not as it is expressed in the frozen volumes of savants, or in the declamations of politicians, but in the prayers of the Church and in the lives of saints, shines with a unique light. Only that stoicism which Emily imposed upon her sisters could uplift the banality of their narrow lives. Yet, in truth, stoicism never uplifts anything: it has neither the virtue nor the contagion of courage and resignation, it is in itself its own reward because it does nothing but for itself, and has no love in it.

We see, therefore, the poor daughters of a poor

clergyman, defending themselves but feebly against ill-fortune, and retiring into themselves with courage not unmixed with bitterness. If the Brontës had never published anything, they would still be worthy of pity, certainly, but they would not be interesting.

But, open the copy-books of poems which Charlotte was about to have printed, and immediately we see the authors in a new light. God reveals Himself to the world through saintliness, charity and heroism; He also reveals Himself through genius: these girls, leading their lives as housekeepers and schoolteachers, were visited by what is called for lack of another term poetic inspiration. They knew, from frequent experiences, what it is to be transported, by the meeting of sounds with certain feelings and images, into another world where everything becomes charming and easy. This tall dark girl, Emily, whom we see beating a rug in the garden of the parsonage, or kneeling as she counts apples in a room, hears voices when she walks in the moors; the bell flowers of the heather speak to her from the winding cleft of the rock, and evasive music passes with her through the solitary gorge; Anne, timid and silent, is plunged into a lovely dream by the star over the mountain; Charlotte no longer feels the weight of her responsibility and her hindrances: she is cradled in long rhythms where she gives herself up to the violence which is the hidden basis of her nature. Read one of the weak Lamartinian imitations by Eugénie de Guérin alongside a poem, a real poem, by Emily Brontë whose verses take flight like beautiful wild birds, and at once the two women change rank. Eugénie remains exquisite, but she is on her own level, the other is a being apart. Such is the privilege

of the poet; he may be a weak and cowardly man, but at certain moments he raises himself above humanity. Seek nothing noble in the love letters of poor Musset, but read over again *L'Espoir en Dieu*.

Charlotte and Anne do not rank as high as Emily. Charlotte makes verses with unusual ease, she has movement and harmony; into one or two of her pieces – the poem entitled 'Apostasy,' for instance – she knows how to infuse a passion which recalls Browning, but she is often prolix and nearly always romantic. A poem which she translated from French would seem rather to have been translated from German. Once only, in a piece entitled 'Memory,' full of the pantheistic poetry of the grave, familiar to Emily, her idea found expression that was worthy of her powers.

Anne's muse, also, is religious and profoundly sad. Calvinism had laid its iron hand on her from infancy, and she had never freed herself from the cruel bond. Like Cowper, to whom she dedicated some verses written as between comrades in misfortune, she loved God but saw Him as terrible. Often a quickly-turned image shows that she also was responsive to nature, that she knew the intoxication caused by an autumnal wind shaking the woods; once or twice she stammered under her breath some love verses, but what was too instinctive in her soul was supplicating, hopeless prayer. The fear of ultimate damnation made her innocent little voice tremble.

There is something extremely moving in the rhythm of a short piece, 'Appeal,' which begins with an avowal of unutterable fatigue, and in the chastened joy of another poem in which she thanks God for one day, one single day that was happy.

Twice she rebels: once in apostrophizing the in-

solent security of the 'elect,' as Calvinists sure of their salvation call themselves. Nothing more poignant has ever been written. There is not a word in it which does not express a suffering soul, dimly feeling that the doctrine is condemned by the pride of its adepts, but incapable of strength to express this thought to God except in a pitiful sob. The other piece is the one I alluded to in speaking of the religion of the Brontës. It is called 'The Doubter's Prayer,' and is the last cry of a soul too long tortured:

THE DOUBTER'S PRAYER

Eternal Power, of earth and air!
Unseen, yet seen in all around,
Remote, but dwelling everywhere,
Though silent, heard in every sound;

If e'er Thine ear in mercy bent,
When wretched mortals cried to Thee,
And if, indeed, Thy Son was sent,
To save lost sinners such as me:

Then, hear me now, while kneeling here,
I lift to Thee my heart and eye,
And all my soul ascends in prayer,
Oh, give me – give me Faith! I cry.

Without some glimmering in my heart,
I could not raise this fervent prayer;
But oh, a stronger light impart,
And in Thy mercy fix it there.

While faith is with me, I am blest;
It turns my darkest night to day,
But while I clasp it to my breast,
I often feel it slide away.

Then, cold and dark, my spirit sinks
To see my light of life depart,
And every fiend of Hell, methinks,
Enjoys the anguish of my heart.

What shall I do, if all my love,
My hopes, my toil, are cast away,
And if there be no God above,
To hear and bless me when I pray?

If this be vain delusion all,
If death be an eternal sleep,
And none can hear my secret call,
Or see the silent tears I weep!

Oh, help me, God! For Thou alone
Canst my distracted soul relieve;
Forsake it not: is is thine own,
Though weak, yet longing to believe.

Oh, drive these cruel doubts away;
And make me know that Thou art God!
A faith, that shines by night and day,
Will lighten every earthly load.

If I believe that Jesus died,
And waking, rose to reign above;
Then surely Sorrow, Sin, and Pride
Must yield to Peace, and Hope, and Love.

And all the blessèd words He said
Will strength and holy joy impart:
A shield of safety o'er my head,
A spring of comfort in my heart.

Sorrowful effusions! There is no question in these verses of art, expression or beauty – they expose the bleeding wounds of a suffering soul. No one has

ever more simply made use of rhythm to express sacred things, over which criticism has no rights.

Emily is as strong as her sister is weak, and besides this little waving flower she seems like a force of nature. She too wrote a few religious poems. These are her last verses: they show in themselves her dominating character, the intrepidity of her thought, and the wing-force of her poetry:

'No coward soul is mine,
No trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere:
I see Heaven's glories shine,
And faith shines equal, arming me from fear.

O God within my breast,
Almighty, ever-present Deity!
Life – that in me has rest,
As I – undying Life – have power in Thee!

Vain are the thousand creeds
That move men's hearts: unutterably vain;
Worthless as withered weeds,
Or idlest froth amid the boundless main,

To awaken doubt in one
Holding so fast by Thine infinity;
So surely anchored on
The steadfast rock of immortality.

With wide-embracing love
Thy spirit animates eternal years,
Pervades and broods above,
Changes, sustains, dissolves, creates and rears.

Though earth and man were gone,
And suns and universes ceased to be,
And Thou were left alone,
Every existence would exist in Thee.

There is not room for Death,
Nor atom that his might could render void:
Thou – THOU art Being and Breath,
And what THOU art may never be destroyed.'

What lies behind this pantheistic theology, so infinitely far from the trembling Calvinism of the unhappy Anne? Scepticism or faith? Pride or only an invincible hope? Who can tell? But surely there is the most singular self-possession, a profound feeling of security in the luminous perception of a few consoling truths, in the possession of simple feelings easy to sustain, and in a complete disdain of all the rest.

She says again:

'And am I wrong to worship where
Faith cannot doubt, nor hope despair,
Since my own soul can grant my prayer?'

Such is her religion and her morality. She was a stoic, if you like, for nobody has ever known how to endure pain more silently, but only critics given to easy metaphors and summary judgments have been able to say that she was pessimistic. Anybody who is sufficiently attracted by her poetry to study and understand its spirit will see that, of the three sisters, she was incomparably the happiest. One of her stanzas says:

'Riches I hold in light esteem,
And Love I laugh to scorn;
And lust of fame was but a dream,
That vanished with the morn.'

What more was needed to make her happy? Nothing, except perhaps a less distressing brother. She

detested strangers, any sort of new things or noise. She would have had a horror of the notoriety which Charlotte achieved later on. What she loved were the peaceful atmosphere of her home, the routine of her independent life, and the boundless liberty of the moors. All this she enjoyed to the limit of human capacity. Matthew Arnold, in some verses written upon the cemetery at Haworth, represents Emily as consuming herself and dying of it. Easy metaphors. Emily died of consumption. With healthy lungs she would have lived as long as a Goethe, and the lyric intensity of her impressions would have left intact a soul of the fibre of hers.

We have seen that to her the life after death had no terrors. She believed in immortality without explaining why or how, sometimes contradicting herself, summoning the triumph of good over evil, or contenting herself with an aspiration towards the time 'when I shall sleep without identity.' The many passages in which she evokes ideas of the grave are invariably peaceful, and what is horrible becomes charming by the grace of her rhythm – without dread she sees 'The time when my sunny hair shall with grass roots entwined be.' Believer or pantheist, and probably both at the same time, she faces the greatest problems with serenity:

> 'So hopeless is the world without,
> The world within I doubly prize.'

Charlotte, brave as she was, would never have said that in the same way. One must feel very rich and very sure of oneself never to be obliged to borrow.

Two or three times she seemed to yield to the influence of her time and used, as Charlotte did, a

romantic title: 'The Prisoner,' 'The Outcast Mother,' 'A Death Scene,' but always to celebrate life and light, open spaces and the caress of nature. In this she reminds us of the Greeks. Nothing strikes her down, scarcely anything saddens her, she is queen of her own life.

There is little to say concerning her art. The moors were the principal source of her inspiration, and those hackneyed, eternal things to which both descriptive and lyric poets incessantly return: the wind, the sun, flowers and birds. She says nothing that has not been said a thousand times; but she says it in another way. There is not one of her poems in which somewhere the reader is not made to feel the touch of the magic wand of truth suddenly appearing delightful. Charlotte, also, wrote fine verses, but the mountain breeze does not blow through them. With simple words Emily constantly achieves a rare effect. Rare is the word we repeat under our breath, feeling that this extraordinary girl retained the power to see realities which we pass by, unseeing. Like Keats, she must have known that after her death she would be ranked among the poets.

But this she was never told during her life. The copy-books that Charlotte wished to have printed did indeed appear in a book, but Emily's poems did not possess the virtue her elder sister had attributed to them, and in no sense did they achieve what is called success.

Charlotte tried at first to find a publisher who would issue the book at his own expense. She and her sisters were totally inexperienced. She knocked at nine or ten doors without receiving even a word of response. Branwell, who had not at this time

excluded himself from the family life, advised her to send a stamp with her letter, and she at last had the joy of receiving from Robert Chambers, the Edinburgh publisher, not an acceptance but some counsel.

His advice was apparently not very encouraging, for Charlotte's next effort was to ask a bookseller what he would charge to print the volume and undertake its sale. This time she wrote to Aylott & Jones, in London, who agreed to publish the book for the sum of thirty-one pounds sterling. Thanks to a more than strict economy and a small inheritance from their aunt, the sisters each had a share of the Liverpool railroad, and it was probably this reserve fund to which they now had recourse. Charlotte wished the book to be of good appearance, and insisted upon having the paper and type to her taste. The arrival of the proofs must have been an event. But a difficulty arose: the three sisters wished to be incognito–and in fact they held to this idea as long as it was possible. They had selected as pseudonyms Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell, which retained their initials and did not betray their sex,but it was necessary to deceive the village postman, and this appeared difficult. Indeed, it is surprising that Charlotte could remain unknown for so long a time merely by having her proofs sent to Currer Bell in care of Miss Brontë.

The book appeared early in May, 1846, under the bare title: *Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell.* It was a 16mo volume of 165 pages. Charlotte refused to spend more than a few shillings for the advertisement of the book, and had it sent only to ten reviews and newspapers. A few critics noticed it in the kind

of articles which group twenty-five or thirty authors at once, and thus clear the writer's work-table. The *Athenæum* of July 4 was the first to speak of these twice nameless Bells in an article not lacking in penetration. The critic gave the palm to Emily, whom he called 'a fine, quaint spirit,' words which reveal a real but confused perception of Emily's originality. The *Dublin University Magazine* also published an indulgent appreciation. Charlotte wrote to the editor, in the name of the others, a letter which shows to what extent these infinitely obscure beginners were pure artists. She briefly thanked him for the kind mention he had made of their poems, and devoted all the rest of her letter to the pleasure she had felt in certain considerations upon modern poetry in which she had found, condensed, ' the spirit itself of truth and beauty.' The Brontës always saw the abyss which separates the pure joys of the mind from the satisfactions of vanity.

During that same month of July a Mr. Enoch, of Warwick, wrote to the Brontës, or rather to the Bells, to ask for their autographs. This was all. The little volume had one more buyer among lovers of poetry, and never another. A year later the accounts of Aylott & Jones continued to indicate, to the credit of Messrs. Bell, two copies sold. Then Charlotte, before abandoning the edition to the trunk makers, sent copies to De Quincey, Tennyson, and a few other famous writers with a good-humoured letter in which, naturally, she asked nothing.[1] In her biogra-

[1] A certain number of copies were sold later on to the house of Smith & Elder. They sometimes appear at book sales, when their price is seldom less than twenty pounds.

phical notice of her sisters, she has given her final verdict upon this first production:

'The book was printed; it is scarcely known, and all of it that merits to be known are the poems of Ellis Bell. The fixed conviction I held, and hold, of the worth of these poems has not, indeed, received the confirmation of much favourable criticism; but I must retain it notwithstanding.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

★

While the Brontës were correcting the proofs of their book of verse, they were also engaged in other work. Charlotte wrote to their publishers in a letter dated April 6, that the Messrs. Bell were each about to complete a work of fiction, but that they should not like to publish these books at their own expense, and offered them to Aylott & Jones, to be printed separately or in three uniform volumes. These works were *The Professor*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*. *Agnes Grey* does not count, and we have no means of knowing how long Emily had been at work on *Wuthering Heights*; as to Charlotte's novel, the letter to M. Héger already quoted shows that it could not have been begun before the end of the summer of 1845.

That was a solemn winter during which *Wuthering Heights* was written. We know that Emily continued as usual to do her housework, to make the bread, to read German and play with her animals, but we do not know how Heathcliff took form in her brain. In this matter Charlotte is far too chary of details, for she had seen, day by day, the progress of this astonishing creation. The three sisters worked the instant they had any leisure. The stationer in the village of Greenwood said that they consumed enormous quantities of paper. Charlotte, who was near-sighted and quickly fatigued, wrote with a pencil on demy paper fastened on cardboard, which served as a desk without weight. She wrote without erasures, and when inspiration came, but as she never planned her work she was often obliged to destroy her sheets and begin all over again.

At nine o'clock, after prayers, Mr. Brontë went

upstairs, followed by his human wreck; he stopped a moment on the stairway to wind the clock, and the sisters were left alone in the dining-room. They had kept their old habit of turning off the light and walking up and down by firelight. It was at this hour that they told one another of the state of their work and discussed its progress. The same conditions were continued the following year while Charlotte was preparing *Jane Eyre*; it was on such an evening that she defended, against the opinions of her sisters, the possibility of making her heroine both ugly and seductive. But these are unimportant details, and perhaps others which would be, however, so welcome to criticism, would almost be equally negligible. What are known as the literary sources of any work certainly help us to understand it, but can teach us nothing about that profound interior gushing force which is the inspiration itself of a masterpiece, and which learning divines less easily than the intuition of a child. Charlotte could indeed have informed us how Emily made certain alterations or corrections, but neither she nor anybody, not even Emily herself, could have told us whence came the inspiration behind Heathcliff's account of the scene in the churchyard.[1]

Aylott & Jones were led to refuse the offer made them, and the three novels began their travels. English publishers are not loquacious, but they are prompt, and in less than three months the poor manuscripts had been sent back six or seven times to Mr. Currer Bell in care of Miss Brontë, accompanied by a brief declination. With her usual courage, and a candour which many people would

[1] *Wuthering Heights*, chap. xxix.

consider exaggerated in dealing with the publishing corporation, Charlotte would strike out the last name written on the wrapping-paper, write the new one in its place, and return the package to the postman.

After repeated refusals, Charlotte thought it best to separate her book from those of her sisters, but the *Professor* was not more fortunate travelling singly than in company. It was continually reported that the book lacked plot and interest. *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* were finally accepted by Newby, of London, a kind of unlicensed publisher, half commercial traveller, who was not very conscientious in business but ticklish as to morality and religion, and who, in accepting *Wuthering Heights*, declared himself much shocked by the brutality of the book.

Charlotte says somewhere that after a while these repeated failures reduced her almost to despair. It is surprising that the *Professor* should have been so roughly treated. It is the only book written by Charlotte which has no prolix passages; it goes without saying that it is perfectly written, and one or two of the characters are pretty sketches of the pictures we find in *Villette*. M. Héger is unrecognizable, but his wife is there, alive and already passably blackened.

Acute anxiety of another sort was added to these disappointments, and perhaps helped Charlotte to accept them. For some time Mr. Brontë's eyesight had been weakening. One day a cataract completed its growth and the poor man woke up blind. This was a disaster for the household, as it became necessary to pay a supplementary vicar. Mr. Brontë supported his trial with courage. His daughters read

to him, and he continued to direct the parish as well as he could. He preached as usual and, what seemed very singular, his sermons, which had always lasted exactly a half-hour when he could watch the clock, continued to be almost the same length now that he could no longer see. The congregation listened with respect to this tall, erect man speaking to them from his darkness. For a long period Mr. Brontë was afraid to risk an operation, but at last resigned himself to the experiment. In August, 1846, Charlotte took him to Manchester where the operation was performed. He was obliged to remain for a considerable time in a darkened room, patiently waiting for the return of the light; and it was in a neighbouring room that Charlotte began *Jane Eyre* on a day when *The Professor* came back to her from one of its useless journeys.

At the end of a month she and her father returned to Haworth. Branwell had evidently profited by their absence, because shortly afterwards a bailiff came to announce that they would have to pay his debts or he would go to York prison. Naturally, the debts were paid. Then came an early and severe winter, with a return of Anne's asthma. As for Charlotte, she described herself as looking 'grey, old, worn, and sunk.'

During this sad winter she worked on her novel, and neither her father nor Branwell knew what she was doing. She did not lack inspiration, and some of her chapters carried her along more tensely than any of her innumerable readers: the last part was written at high tension in less than three weeks, during which she wrote continuously. No matter how feeble and worn she might be physically, intellectual work

did not fatigue her. In July, 1847, she was still making methodical efforts to place her first novel. It was then she sent it to Smith & Elder, reliable and substantial publishers established in Cornhill. She thought it useful to tell them that she was about to finish another work in three volumes, which she would also submit to them and which might perhaps aid the sale of *The Professor*. She was feverishly completing the *dénouement* of *Jane Eyre* when, after the usual interval, her manuscript was returned. As she mechanically sought in the package the customary formula of refusal, she was surprised to find rather a long letter. The publisher had condescended to discuss the merits and defects of her book, giving her good literary and commercial reasons for its rejection and ended by saying that he was quite ready to examine the three-volume novel. This was the cry of 'Land ahoy!' after a hopeless voyage. Less than twenty days after the arrival of this letter, the manuscript of *Jane Eyre*, carefully prepared in Charlotte's beautiful writing, took the train for London.

Smith & Elder's reader was Mr. Williams, an intelligent and kind-hearted man about forty-eight years old. His first reading of *Jane Eyre* overwhelmed him. He went at once to give his impression to Mr. Smith. The latter, still very young but already very sceptical, turned over the manuscript to another member of the staff, Mr. Taylor, a clear-minded, reliable Scotchman, who carried it home. The taste for novels in England is almost frenetic. Mr. Taylor appeared next morning ravished with *Jane Eyre*, which he had sat up reading the entire night. This time the publisher was astonished, and wished to see this marvellous manuscript with his

own eyes. Six weeks later the three volumes of *Jane Eyre* were published.

The story of this prodigious success has been related many times. Only Mr. Enoch, of Warwick, the other unknown buyer of the poems, and a few tired or bored critics knew slightly the name of Currer Bell, when overnight this name became famous and was passed from mouth to mouth by a public who were insatiable devourers of novels. *Vanity Fair* had been appearing in numbers during six or seven months, and it was in the midst of the ever-growing popularity of that masterpiece that the book of an unknown author achieved success with the rapidity of a thunderbolt.

The first edition was exhausted in six weeks. When the second appeared early in December, a crowd of newspapers had already notified the public that a masterpiece had been born, and they rushed to buy it. Soon afterwards Charlotte received with an astonishment mixed with gratitude a cheque for a hundred pounds. Her publisher was a gentleman and a perfect business man. It will be seen later that permanent relations were established between them. The Londoner was smiling and nonchalant, Charlotte full of deference; she had a much higher idea of a Cornhill publisher than the young and elegant Mr. Smith had of the obscure though gifted author who worked for him. Each time a cheque came for her, or a new edition of her book appeared, Charlotte was frightened by the thought that her sales might diminish and her publishers have less profit. Hers was true and delicate simplicity combined with provincial fright of financial matters.

In the beginning the success of *Jane Eyre* was

what is called a book-shop success. Everybody bought the book, all the newspapers called it the novel of the season, and curiosity throughout the whole kingdom was concentrated on the enigmatic Currer Bell; but literary judgments came tardily. Charlotte was saddened by the reserve of the *Athenæum*, a review whose opinion she cared for. And when, at last, old and infallible reviews like the *Quarterly* and the *North American Review* gave their verdict, Miss Brontë perceived that against her will, and in spite of having believed herself so well hidden behind her pseudonym, she had given up her personality to the public – that is to say, in many cases to malignity – and that fame is one of the pleasures that cost the highest price. Farewell to our Charlotte of the moors, with whom we were alone in her obscure but intense life! Fortunately, she liked neither crowds nor noise, and we shall still find her sometimes solitary.

CHAPTER TWELVE

★

At the time when she wrote *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë was extremely inexperienced; Haworth, a few local anecdotes, the curates, Brussels, Branwell and his love affair, and her two brief journeys into a world which was certainly not the great world, and which she had observed from the nursery where she sat sewing, tormented by the children – that was all.

Her literary experience, however, was more extensive: she had read many novelists, many poets, a few historians (no philosophers, as George Eliot had), following her own will and judging with entire independence. It would be interesting to know the titles of the forty French books which Mary Taylor had sent her some time before her stay in Brussels. Were they works of the first quality? Evidently not, as the chief merit she attributed to them was to familiarize her with current French. They were probably 'reading-room' books and nothing more. At Brussels she read Victor Hugo, Lamartine, Vigny, several volumes of George Sand's, but nothing of Balzac's. She liked Chénier and detested Racine. Amongst these authors the one who impressed her most was George Sand.

She had already written enormously – enough to fill twenty volumes, imaginative, unreal and redundant. Her last effort had been *The Professor*, which, on the contrary, she had tried to make realistic, simple and very close to life, with its interest centred in one or two characters and justness of handling. This experiment had not succeeded. The publishers demanded a plot, many incidents, passion; simplicity was not saleable. Therefore, on the day when, at

Manchester, she wrote the title of *Jane Eyre* on a blank copy-book, she was aware that she was going to write a romantic novel. Should it be thought that this would cost her a great effort? It is sufficient to read *Jane Eyre* to be convinced of the contrary. Never was a novel written with more pleasure. But there is a document in existence which gives us precisely Charlotte's ideas on the literary principles of her genre, and the natural tendencies which she herself brought to them. One of the critics who judged her novel with the most perspicacity, and at the same time sympathy, was George Lewes, the Lewes of George Eliot. He reproached her with having made use of a melodramatic element the presence of which Charlotte herself would have recognized if she had been as completely converted as she thought to the idea of fiction based directly upon life. But she did not accept this criticism, nor admit that she should be given for model the marvellous exactitude of Jane Austen. She felt an internal force of which she was not mistress, and which it did not please her to suppress.

'If I ever *do* write another book,' she replied to her critic, 'I think I will have nothing of what you call "melodrama"; I *think* so, but I am not sure. I *think*, too, I will endeavour to follow the counsel which shines out of Miss Austen's "mild eyes," "to finish more and be more subdued"; but neither am I sure of that. When authors write best, or, at least, when they write most fluently, an influence seems to waken in them, which becomes their master – which will have its own way – putting out of view all behests but its own, dictating certain words, and insisting on their

being used, whether vehement or measured in their nature; new-moulding characters, giving unthought-of turns to incidents, rejecting carefully elaborated old ideas, and suddenly creating and adopting new ones. . . . Why do you like Miss Austen so very much? I am puzzled on that point. . . . I had not seen *Pride and Prejudice* till I read that sentence of yours' – (that he would rather have written *Pride and Prejudice* or *Tom Jones* than any of the Waverley Novels) – 'and then I got the book. And what did I find? An accurate daguerreotyped portrait of a commonplace face; a carefully fenced, highly cultivated garden, with neat borders and delicate flowers; but no glance of a bright, vivid physiognomy, no open country, no fresh air, no blue hill, no bonny beck. I should hardly like to live with her ladies and gentlemen, in their elegant but confined houses. . . .

'Now I can understand admiration of George Sand; for though I never saw any of her works which I admired throughout (even *Consuelo*, which is the best, or the best that I have read, appears to me to couple strange extravagance with wondrous excellence), yet she has a grasp of mind which, if I cannot fully comprehend, I can very deeply respect: she is sagacious and profound; Miss Austen is only shrewd and observant.'

In another letter to Mr. Lewes she reverts to Miss Austen's manner:

'Can there be a great artist without poetry? What I call, what I will bend to, as a great artist, then – cannot be destitute of the divine gift. But by *poetry*, I am sure, you understand something different to what I do, as you do by "sentiment." It is *poetry*, as I

comprehend the word, which elevates that masculine George Sand, and makes out of something coarse something godlike. It is "sentiment" . . . which extracts the venom from that formidable Thackeray. . . . Miss Austen being, as you say, without "sentiment," without *poetry*, maybe *is* sensible, real (more *real* than *true*), but she cannot be great.'

It is surprising that Charlotte should have reached the age of thirty-one without having read Miss Austen, but that is of no importance. What is important, however, is that she did not like her masterly art, her reserve, her country-house realism, her fencing, circumspect dialogue,[1] and that naturally, instinctively, she opposed to all this the fiery mettle of George Sand.

In fact, one cannot read Miss Brontë without thinking of George Sand. In both there is the same absence of plans, the same mixture of convincing truth and of impossibilities in which the author alone believes, the same latent lyrism manifesting itself at intervals in poetic effusions, the same vehemence, the same passion, and the same taste for excessively dramatic situations – in a word, the same romanticism. Certainly the Charlotte whom the publishers wanted was not less natural than she who had just written *The Professor*, and it was doing no violence to her to tell her to give her imagination free rein: she was a realist in this double sense, that though her creations are often founded upon living people, and give to an intense degree the impression of reality, yet, while she is writing her regard is turned inward,

[1] Striking resemblances, however, may be observed with respect to dialogue.

not outward; all her characters pass directly from her brain to her book, without any preoccupation on her part with the primitive model or, in the least, with her reader, and this is the source both of her power and her faults.

A subtle and ingenious author could pause at this point and indulge in no little 'fine writing,' but the reader will perhaps share our own opinion that there is already more than enough fine writing in the libraries. Let us merely try not to lose sight of the relation of the writer's temperament to her work.

It would seem, first, that a woman, solitary and concentrated, conscious of the purity of her life and of her thoughts, independent in her reading, her tastes and ideas, would have a tendency, even a need, to be personal and autobiographical, impassioned, and powerful, and perhaps more powerful than masterly.

And so, in *Jane Eyre* as well as in *The Professor* and *Villette*, the heroine is a young teacher, poor and plain. The question is how to marry her – let the reader have no illusions, these are old-fashioned novels! – in the most interesting manner possible. The incidents will be as they may, sometimes dramatic, more often – George Lewes was right – melodramatic. The author knew that the English was the ideal audience of novelists, and did not mind serving them sometimes with rather thick morsels to swallow.[1] As to her heroes, they were not to be the

[1] Hardy is the most resolutely realistic author. However, no French reader, at least, would accept the *dénouement* of *The Return of the Native* or of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, nor the numberless improbabilities in *The Hand of Ethelberta*.

sort of man she might love in real life in the village of Haworth in Yorkshire, but the kind she dreamed of obscurely in her subconsciousness, revenging herself on the material flatness of her existence: fantastic, romantic, violent and enigmatic. There was not one of them – Rochester, Robert Moore, Paul Emmanuel – whom she did not love more passionately in imagination than it was ever given to her to love in reality.

Jane Eyre is an orphan, reared by a rich aunt who does not love her. Because of her poverty she is scorned by everybody. She has a boy and two girl cousins of her own age to martyrize her. One fine day she rebels, and after a terrible scene tells her aunt that her dead husband must be saddened in his grave by the way she treats the daughter of his sister. (Marvellous analysis of a child's soul.) She is sent away to a boarding-school that is part orphan asylum. This is Lowood, her revenge on Cowan Bridge, the sad school where her sisters were cut down in their youth. (Admirable portraits of children, terrible sketches of a cruel assistant-directress and of the wicked and hypocritical clergyman who founded the school.) Jane Eyre grows up, acquires her education, and the day comes when she is capable of earning her living. She becomes governess in the home of an old lady, Mrs. Fairfax, who is bringing up a young French girl in a solitary country mansion. Jane is happy. She takes solitary walks. Once, late in the afternoon, she meets a man on horseback, to whom, when he falls from his horse in a sudden accident, she is able to be of help. This horseman is Mr. Rochester, father of little Adele and owner of the country house, which he never visits. He interests

himself in Jane Eyre, looks at her drawings, makes her talk, makes fun of her, speaks harshly to her, then tenderly, says strange things, looks frightful, grinds his teeth, laughs bitterly. Jane likes him. At the end of three chapters he tells her his story, or a part of it. The little French girl, Adele, for whom he has very little affection, is no doubt his own daughter, but also the child of Céline de Varens whom he has known in Paris, who deceived him and left him a sceptic and cynic for life. Jane Eyre does not interrupt him.[1] A deep but unavowed sympathy being thus established between them, Rochester goes away to visit a neighbouring country house. Rumour has it that he is going to marry the beautiful Miss Ingram. Jane is jealous. Rochester soon returns, bringing with him a brilliant group of people, including Miss Ingram, who is indeed extremely beautiful but proud and disdainful, and it seems incomprehensible that Rochester should love her. Country house life. Society games. Rochester disguises himself as an old woman, and tells everybody's fortune without being recognized.

In the house there is a strange chambermaid who laughs horribly in the night, sets fire to Mr. Rochester's bed curtains, and almost murders a certain Mr. Mason. She is allowed to stay, however, and by day is perfectly quiet, peacefully sewing with the other women. One night Jane Eyre sees an unknown spectral woman in her room, and nearly dies of fright.

Rochester seems to be resolved to marry Miss Ingram, but without illusions, for he analyses her pitilessly to Jane Eyre. The latter is called to the

[1] Charlotte had often heard similar confidences from Branwell.

deathbed of her wicked aunt, and again meets her girl cousins. The most selfish of the two does not fail to become a Catholic and prioress of a convent in Lille in Flanders.

When she returns Rochester, who has been bored without her, asks her to be his wife. She consents. The day approaches; he comes. When, in the church, the clergyman is about to join the hands of Rochester and Jane, a voice is heard saying that the bridegroom is about to commit the crime of bigamy. It is true, and he confesses it. The phantom woman, murderous and incendiary, who laughs in the night like a hyena, is his legitimate wife. He tells Jane Eyre the history of his marriage, with all its details. The woman imprisoned in the attic at night, but who sometimes escaped, is a monster of unchastity and intemperance to whom he is riveted by the law. He proposes to Jane to fly from England. The following night Jane flies, but alone. She wanders in despair over the moors. She wanders whole days, and as she has no money the peasants give her some of the food of the pigs. One evening when she is about to yield to exhaustion, she comes to a house where two sisters live; they take her in. Follow a few days of paradisaical peace. The sisters have a brother, a young, handsome, austere clergyman. Jane Eyre becomes a teacher in his parish. She discovers that she is his cousin, but he wishes nevertheless to marry her and take her with him to convert the infidels. She is on the point of agreeing when she hears the call of a distant, plaintive voice. She understands, and flies at once to Thornfield. There she finds the country-house burned down, Rochester blinded, and his wife killed in the fire. Her uncertainty continues a

while longer, and then comes the final confidence: 'Reader, I married him.'

Such is a faithful analysis of the novel *Jane Eyre*. If you cry out, O modern reader, if you declare that it is impossible that such a famous novel should be so full of improbabilities, of expedients that even Canon Schmidt would reject, I only reply that I have spared you many things in the book which I have not had time to relate. You are not an English reader of Charlotte Brontë's day. You have been spoiled by over fifty years of so-called realism and minute analysis. You accommodate yourself perfectly to books without characters, without profound accumulated truth or interest of any sort provided they resemble exactly the life of Tom, Dick or Harry. It is wonderful when the reader finds in them a 'psychological crisis' that merits the name. You exclaim 'Childish!' if a book offers somewhat extraordinary events, forgetting that extraordinary events happen every day, but that if even one of these realities were introduced into one of your 'novels of real life,' it would crumble like a house of cards, whereas *Jane Eyre* stands firm. You judge a novel of sixty years ago like a book of to-day, analysing it, as if every work of art did not reveal its title to mastery, as Joubert says, by its method of execution and its details.

Try, then, to rid yourself of prejudices; forget Bourget, Henry James and especially their imitators; read over again a few French or English works whose power is denied by nobody but which bristle with the same impossibilities as *Jane Eyre*: certain novels, for example, by W. Scott or Balzac. Then read Charlotte Brontë's book, in all its linguistic richness. This, I think, is what you will find:

To begin, or rather to continue, with its defects, you will be surprised by the worldly ignorance revealed, for instance, in the sketch of Miss Ingram. The aristocrats which appear in *Jane Eyre* are only characterized by their insolence. Miss Ingram is a goddess furnished with the soul of a milliner, at once disdainful and low, and speaking the language of a commercial traveller. She calls a servant 'fool.'[1] Rochester would be entirely convincing if he occupied the same social rank as Hunsden in *The Professor*, but is impossible as an elegant Byronite.

These solecisms amuse more than they annoy. On the other hand, the most patient man will be conscious of a nervous irritation on remarking the extent to which Charlotte identifies herself with her heroine, and the peaceful and profound pleasure she feels in following herself through six hundred pages. It is nothing that Jane Eyre should be unhappy and a governess, that a pompous erudition, with French phrases and poetical quotations abounding, should characterize her; but what seems intolerable is that Charlotte is so evidently pleased to be Jane Eyre, plain but mysteriously and irresistibly seductive, pure, strong, heroic, intelligent, a naïve child yet a perfect woman, modest yet alluring, fascinating and elusive, 'the savage beautiful creature' as she calls herself once with a talent that exasperates the reader, that she causes Rochester to make love to her in admirable language, with whispered passion, and sometimes a sort of masculine tenderness that is like mellow wine. There is one scene which Shakespeare

[1] In *Agnes Grey*, Anne Brontë introduces a certain Matilda, an amazon who swears like a cartman.

would not deny, but which one would tear out of the book with infinite relief.

The marriage is agreed upon, and Rochester and Jane go off in a carriage. The little Adele is with them – which is odious, even though Jane Eyre is her governess. The lovers move her about as if she were a troublesome package. As she is a chatterbox she soon intrudes in this duet of nightingales. Not being able to suppress her, they admit her into the conversation, and the submissive Hercules, Rochester, gives double meanings to the language of the nursery, transporting Jane Eyre to the moon, dressing her in a rainbow scarf, etc. The scene is utterly unsupportable. Never has egoism, the tranquil brazenness of triumphant passion, shown itself more nakedly. This is the great defect of *Jane Eyre*.

But one feels instantly that this defect is a fault of genius. All the time while she was writing this novel, on almost every page of which passion broods or breaks forth, Charlotte was in the Haworth parsonage, where it was very cold, where nobody was well, where the living corpse of Branwell added horror to day and night; she was poor, troubled about the future, more unknown than ever, and continually wounded by the repeated rejections of *The Professor*. It was in the midst of such mortifications that the poor daughter of a clergyman dreamed the dreams of the Lady of Nohant. This sickly little woman, occupied with the kitchen and linen closet, confined to the narrow ideas and conversation of provincials, had within herself a reserve of passion sufficient for ten lives and a library of novels.

Nor was this all. In addition to this volcanic power, she had that sureness of eye and hand which

belongs to great artists. Her method saves what would otherwise be intolerable, and when her material is simply human, as we like it to be nowadays, the least details show her superiority. Read the first chapters of *Jane Eyre*: who has ever painted better a suffering and exasperated child? Who has better shown that fermentation of mature ideas with childish visions which everybody remembers having had, but that so few can describe?

Add to her broad full manner, like that of a great symphony in which each note helps to produce the ensemble, her marvellous talent for arranging a landscape, for instance, so as to be in harmony with the scene. There is admirable gradation in the effect produced by the last chapters: Jane wandering over the moors, exhausted and almost mad, and suddenly reaching the mysterious dwelling of the two sisters where everything is exquisite and poignant poetry. Yes, Charlotte's imagination turns easily to melodrama, but even when thus deceived she retains the tact of a Racine. There are a number of pages in *Jane Eyre* which bear the stamp of the classics, that is to say, the perfect marriage of the style to the idea.

The language of the book is what her diction was always to be. Charlotte had formed her style upon that of the English writers of the eighteenth century, upon Johnson possibly: at twenty years of age she wrote letters that might readily be taken to be his. Simple solid sentences, with adjectives. This was always to be her manner, and she was never to be afraid of adjectives, like most of the cowards who now copy Voltaire. But of adjectives she had an immense supply, of all weights and of all colours, and she threw them with inconceivable certainty into

sentences whose rhythm can be felt – this great magic secret of true styles – and into which they merged like reflections on a majestic river. In fact, this little woman wrote very great English.

This is the impression which *Jane Eyre* makes to-day, old-fashioned as some parts are even to the verge of ridicule, but possessing power which carries everything before it.

In 1848 only the literary qualities of the book were in evidence. George Lewes, a critic with German erudition but French culture, was almost the only one to show impatience with what irritates us now. The plot did not seem more extravagant than those of most of the contemporary novels, and compared to *Sybil*, another success of the day, *Jane Eyre* was evidently the product of genius. What seems incredible is that, thirty years after Byron, Rochester appeared new and was imitated; his cynicism was elegant, and Charlotte found that she had made a fashion plate.

Scandal had its part in the tremendous success of *Jane Eyre*. Many women found the new heroine unwomanly, stripped of the modesty and delicacy of her sex. She might have been pardoned for listening to Rochester's audacious personal confessions, but could not be pardoned for allowing herself to love too readily, for admitting to Rochester that she loved him, in a word, for possessing a soul naïvely and naturally sentimental. It was the first time that in a work of this style, with claims to be poetical and idealistic, the cold majesty of the romantic heroine was thus degraded. Elderly spinsters always retained their grudge against Charlotte for this treason. The book was declared to be immoral, and though

its success was only increased by this verdict, the author's satisfaction was considerably diminished. She was wounded to the quick one day later, when some author on being presented to her thought it witty to say: 'You and I, Miss Brontë, who have written naughty books.'

British cant, in 1848, was beginning to weaken, but still retained some strength under its parchment skin; and it was as hostile to Charlotte for her latent anti-clericalism as for her pitiless portrait of the Reverend Mr. Brocklehurst, and her denunciation of a school founded and carried on by sanctuary offerings. She was reproached for the bitterness of her first chapters, the revengeful spirit in which she had engraved the silly and wicked face of Aunt Gateshead: she was called ungrateful, heinous, heathenish.

It was this phase of *Jane Eyre* upon which the important reviews concentrated their attacks. A virtuous anonymous critic wrote as follows in the *Quarterly*[1]:

'We have said that this book portrays a heart entirely lacking in grace. This is, in our opinion, the great, the horrible defect of *Jane Eyre*. The heroine is, throughout, the personification of an undisciplined and unregenerate mind. It is true that she behaves well and displays great moral strength, but it is the strength of a soul which is utterly pagan and a law unto itself. We do not find in it a single trace of Christian grace. It has inherited the direst sin of our fallen nature, the sin of pride. Jane Eyre is proud and consequently ungrateful. It has pleased God to

[1] This was a Miss Rigby, afterwards Lady Eastlake.

make her an orphan, without friends, without money, nevertheless, she thanks nobody – least of all the friends, companions and teachers of her lonely youth – for the food and clothing, the care and education they have had the goodness to give her until she could provide for herself. In short, the autobiography of Jane Eyre is an anti-Christian work. It is a long murmur against the well-being of the rich and the privations of the poor, that is to say, a murmur against the divine will. It is a proud affirmation of the rights of man which nothing in God's Word or the dispensations of His providence authorize. It is that tone of discontent which forms the most subtle evil to be combated by the courts, the Christian pulpits and civilized society.'

The critique concluded by saying that the same spirit inspired socialistic Chartism and the novel of *Jane Eyre*.

This woman was not wrong – generalities are always right; to-day Charlotte would be the daughter of a teacher, and Jane Eyre a Bolshevist college girl; but it does not matter. What is astonishing, however, is that the *Quarterly* could print at that date such a rhapsody, and it should be noted that thousands of serious, well-informed and highly moral people must have had the same impression. It seems evident that Charlotte's novel was more often a literary success than one of approval, and that up to a certain point it was a *succès de scandale*.

This criticism and, later, that of the *North American Review*, caused extreme pain to Charlotte. She resembled George Sand only on the literary side. She thrust back at the *Quarterly* in another novel by

putting quotations from its preaching into the mouth of a vulgar and displeasing woman. This was honourable war. But many other things were said in London which she never suspected, and to which it would have been impossible for her to reply. The second edition of *Jane Eyre* contained a warmly appreciative dedication to Thackeray. Evil minds found this significant. Thackeray lived apart from his wife, and there had been gossip because he had a young girl secretary. No doubt, this girl must be Currer Bell, and the giant, Thackeray, railer and cynic with a basis of sentiment, was the original of Rochester, the purity of *Jane Eyre* was simply 'literature,' and the novel was the work of a hussy. Fortunately, Charlotte never heard these rumours. She thought herself perfectly unknown, and when the waves of her success rolled as far as Yorkshire, she was less pleased than with her incognito.

One day she had the amused satisfaction to hear an old clergyman exclaim, concerning *Jane Eyre*: 'Why, they have got —— School, and Mr. —— here, I declare! and Miss ——' (meaning the originals of Lowood, Mr. Brocklehurst, and Miss Temple). He had known them all.

After the success of the second edition, Charlotte decided to share her secret with her father. One morning she said to him:

'Papa, I've been writing a book.'

'Have you, my dear?'

'Yes; and I want you to read it.'

'I am afraid it will try my eyes too much.'

'But it is not in manuscript; it is printed.'

'My dear! you've never thought of the expense it will be! It will be almost sure to be a loss; for how

can you get a book sold? No one knows you or your name.'

'But, papa, I don't think it will be a loss; no more will you, if you will just let me read you a review or two, and tell you more about it.'

At tea-time Mr. Brontë said to Emily and Anne: 'Girls, do you know Charlotte has been writing a book, and it is much better than likely?'

It is indeed singular that Mr. Brontë never harboured the least suspicion of the literary ambitions of his daughters. One day in the garden of the parsonage he met the postman bringing a large package addressed to Currer Bell. 'Currer Bell . . .?' said the old clergyman, 'there is no such person in the parish.'

Branwell never knew that *Jane Eyre* was the work of his sister. In one of Charlotte's letters she said she thought it would be cruel to tell him at a time when his intellectual decadence was rapidly increasing.

Charlotte's publishers, as well as many of her critics, must never have been doubtful concerning her sex. No sooner was *Jane Eyre* printed than they began to treat the unknown author with a consideration they would not have had for a masculine writer. No week passed without their sending her not only the publications of the house but all the interesting novelties. Several times, in her constant literary correspondence with Mr. Williams, Charlotte nearly betrayed herself by a confident, almost familiar tone. She wrote one day in a letter signed by her real name, and written in her assumed quality of intermediary: 'Currer Bell is not known in the district, and I have no wish that he should become known.'

She was so determined to hold by her incognito that she wrote about it in anger to Ellen Nussey, who assuredly had good reason for suspecting her of being an author, since she had seen her correcting proofs at a table where they were working together. This mystery with an intimate friend would seem ridiculous were it not the result of a power for keeping silent and a taste for solitude difficult to conceive. Charlotte would herself have described her letter to her friend as Jesuitical, and in every word her embarrassment was latent, but she ended it by saying resolutely that those who accused her of writing she would regard as enemies.

A week earlier, on her birthday, she had written to Ellen a sort of avowal, partly happy, partly sad, and characteristic of her nature, which certainly authorized the suppositions of her friend: 'I am now thirty-two. Youth is gone – gone and will never come back: can't help it. . . . It seems to me that sorrow must come some time to everybody . . . those who exhaust the dregs early, who drink the lees before the wine, may reasonably hope for more palatable draughts to succeed.' It is curious that she should have thus arrested her words on the very border of confidence.

However, a slight complication was about to compel her to come out from the shadows where she was so fond of lingering.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

★

A FEW weeks after the appearance of *Jane Eyre*, Anne's novel, *Agnes Grey* (the peaceful story of a governess who marries the curate on the last page), and *Wuthering Heights*, Emily's sombre masterpiece, had been published by Newby. These two works were completely eclipsed by *Jane Eyre*, and the public conceived a vague idea that they were nothing more than youthful efforts, inferior and stale, by Currer Bell. One intelligent criticism of *Wuthering Heights* appeared in 1850, but it was the first, and twenty or thirty years passed before Emily's genius was finally recognized. This confusion irritated Charlotte as well as the unjust ignorance of Emily's value.

An American publisher, aware of the success of *Jane Eyre*, arranged with Smith & Elder to see proofs of Currer Bell's next novel. Meanwhile, in June, 1848, Anne finished *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and sent it to Newby.

A few weeks later a letter came to Haworth from Mr. Smith expressing surprise and almost discontent. He had just learned that Newby had promised to a rival American publisher sheets of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, informing the latter that the book had been written by the author of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, and was superior to both these novels.

Charlotte could not endure this distrust on the part of her publisher, and that same evening, after sending a small trunk to Keighley by the cartman, she and her sister set off on foot, in a storm of hail and snow, and took the train for London. Next morning at eight o'clock they were at the Chapter

Coffee House, made a brief toilet and sallied forth to see Mr. Smith. Mrs. Gaskell tells us that they first thought of taking a cab, but decided to walk, and spent an hour in covering the half-mile that separates Cornhill from Paternoster Row. Writing to Mary Taylor, Charlotte describes her arrival at the publishing house of which *Jane Eyre* was at that time the glory:

'We found 65 to be a large bookseller's shop, in a street almost as bustling as the Strand. We went in, walked up to the counter. There were a great many young men and lads here and there. I said to the first I could accost, "May I see Mr. Smith?" He hesitated, looked a little surprised. We sat down and waited a while, looking at some books on the counter, publications of theirs well known to us, of many of which they had sent us copies as presents. At last we were shown up to Mr. Smith. "Is it Mr. Smith?" I said, looking up through my spectacles at a tall young man. "It is." I then put his own letter into his hand directed to Currer Bell. He looked at it and then at me again. "Where did you get this?" he said. I laughed at his perplexity; a recognition took place. I gave my real name – Miss Brontë. We were in a small room, ceiled with a great skylight, and there explanations were rapidly gone into, Mr. Newby being anathematized, I fear, with undue vehemence. Mr. Smith hurried out and returned quickly with one whom he introduced as Mr. Williams, a pale, mild, stooping man of fifty, very much like a faded Tom Dixon. Another recognition and a long nervous shaking of hands. Then followed talk – talk – talk, Mr. Williams being silent, Mr. Smith loquacious.'

It is easy to imagine Mr. Smith in the presence of his shy and silent prodigy, listening attentively behind her spectacles. He wished to take them at once to stay at his mother's house, but they declined. Charlotte returned to the Chapter Coffee House, where she retired with a sick headache. That evening, to their great astonishment – for they had misunderstood what Mr. Smith had said – his two sisters arrived in evening dress to take them to the opera. They were at first filled with consternation. However, they changed to their only other gowns, the work of the Haworth dressmaker, and got into the carriage with the two elegant young girls, of whom the elder was remarkably pretty. In ascending the stairway at the opera Charlotte involuntarily pressed Mr. Williams's arm and said, 'I am not in the least used to this sort of thing.' The opera was *The Barber of Seville*, and though she was not a musician, Charlotte formed a skilful judgment of the production.

Next day being Sunday, they would have liked to hear the famous preacher, Mr. Croly, but he did not preach. They dined at Mr. Smith's house. Monday, they went to see the sights of London; and Tuesday morning they started for home, laden with presents and books and half dead with fatigue. It was Anne's first visit to London, to which, poor girl, she never returned. During her brief sojourn there she was undoubtedly happy, but calm and silent as usual. And Charlotte had seen scarcely anything of London. Accustomed as she was to the monotonous intonation of northern speech, she was surprised and charmed with the modulated pronunciation she heard in the cultivated society of the Smiths. But she

says nothing whatever to show that she felt pleasure in knowing, during those three days, that she was in reality already a famous woman. There was no trace in her of petty literary vanity, but only absolute simplicity. Furthermore, she had a certain characteristic which she notes herself, and which Mrs. Gaskell had remarked during their friendship: she was afraid of happiness, and turned sensitively away when she saw it approach. The dark cloud that envelops those who have suffered never seemed blacker to her than when her sky appeared to be clearing. Her favourite, her most consoling thoughts, which she possessed in common with everybody else, emerged but furtively from the depths of her soul.

There is no evidence that she felt this time any sinister presentiments, or that she dreaded having to pay at once for the little joy she had had; but never could such forebodings have been more promptly justified. A very few weeks after her return Branwell's condition grew worse. For some time he had been sleeping throughout the day and passing the night in a terrible state of over-excitement. He had several attacks of delirium tremens. However, no one had thought him so near the end when, one Sunday morning (September 24, 1848) he died in twenty minutes. He had been in the village the preceding day, and had only stayed in bed one day. His pockets were found full of letters from Mrs. Robinson.

Charlotte wrote to Ellen Nussey:

'His mind had undergone the peculiar change which frequently precedes death, two days previously; the calm of better feelings filled it; a return

of natural affection marked his last moments. He is in God's hands now; and the All-Powerful is likewise the All-Merciful. A deep conviction that he rests at last – rests well after his brief, erring, suffering, feverish life – fills and quiets my mind now. The final separation, the spectacle of his pale corpse, gave me more acute, bitter pain than I could have imagined. Till the last hour comes we never know how much we can forgive, pity, regret a near relative. All his vices were and are nothing now. We remember only his woes.'

Mr. Brontë was prostrated by the death of his only son; it was as if all the hopes he had formerly founded upon him had revived only to perish again under one blow. But the grief of old men passes like that of children. The sisters of the unfortunate young man were more profoundly grieved. Charlotte fell ill and was in bed for a whole month.

She had scarcely become convalescent when she began to observe alarming symptoms in Emily's health: short irregular breathing, pains in her side, constant colds. She had already begun to shut herself up in the silence which was her last defence against her malady. Soon they did not dare to ask her any more how she felt. It was now the beginning of November, and the winter promised to be severe. 'I try to leave all in God's hands,' Charlotte wrote, 'to trust in His goodness; but faith and resignation are difficult to practise under some circumstances.'

On the Sunday following the death of Branwell, Emily went to church, but it was for the last time; she came home never to leave the house again. Charlotte had received from her publishers during the

course of the year a sum of money which she wished to use for her sister, but Emily obstinately refused both doctors and medicines. All that Charlotte could do for her was to send for books from London, which she was still able to read with interest. She wrote for advice about Emily's case to Dr. Forbes, then known as the most eminent English physician – this was all the assistance the poor girls received from the medical art.

It was at this unfortunate moment that the most severe criticism they had sustained appeared in the *North American Review*.

On November 22nd Charlotte wrote to Mr. Williams:

'I put your most friendly letter into Emily's hands as soon as I had myself perused it, taking care, however, not to say a word in favour of homœopathy. . . . It is best usually to leave her to form her own judgment, and *especially* not to advocate the side you wish her to favour; if you do she is sure to lean in the opposite direction, and ten to one will argue herself into non-compliance. . . . After reading your letter she said, "Mr. Williams's intention was kind and good, but he was under a delusion: homœopathy was only another form of quackery." Yet she may reconsider this opinion and come to a different conclusion; her second thoughts are often the best.

'*The North American Review* is worth reading; there is no mincing the matter there. What a bad set the Bells must be! What appalling books they write! To-day, as Emily appeared a little easier, I thought the *Review* would amuse her, so I read it aloud to her and Anne. As I sat between them at

our quiet but now somewhat melancholy fireside, I studied the two ferocious authors. Ellis, the "man of uncommon talents, but dogged, brutal and morose," sat leaning back in his easy chair, drawing his impeded breath as he best could, and looking alas! piteously pale and wasted; it is not his wont to laugh, but he smiled, half amused and half in scorn, as he listened. Acton was sewing; no emotion ever stirs him to loquacity, so he only smiled too, dropping at the same time a single word of calm amazement to hear his character so darkly portrayed. I wonder what the reviewer would have thought of his own sagacity could he have beheld the pair as I did.'

She ended her letter with biting ridicule of the overseas critic – a tone which even suffering could not prevent her from taking. However, she wrote to another friend, 'If Emily were but well, I feel as if I should not care who neglected, misunderstood, or abused me.'

Toward the end of November the situation grew worse. Emily's breathing became more and more painful, and the quickness of her pulse frightening. One day Charlotte searched the moors for some sheltered place where perhaps she might find a spray of heather. She found one, withered but entire. But Emily no longer recognized her favourite flower.

Up to the last minute she refused all aid, and it was one of the most cruel pains of her sisters to hear her mount the stairs, step by step, leaning against the wall, struggling for breath, without daring to follow and help her. On the 19th of December she left her bed, staggering, her eye glazed: nevertheless, she insisted on dressing herself, without aid. Near

the fire they found her comb, which she had not been able to pick up. Feeling at last that death was approaching rapidly, she said that they might send for the doctor. But it was too late. Within two hours she was dead. Only the day before, Charlotte had read to her an essay of Emerson's.

Following the custom of the time, she was buried the next day. An old door between the garden and the churchyard, which was used only for burials, was reopened. As the funeral procession passed through, Keeper, Emily's dog, placed himself near Mr. Brontë and followed the coffin to the last. For weeks afterwards, he stayed at the door of his mistress's room, waiting and wailing.

At first, Charlotte thought she would be courageous. On the 21st she wrote:

'Yesterday, we put her poor wasted mortal frame quietly under the church pavement. We are very calm at present. Why should we be otherwise? The anguish of seeing her suffer is over; the spectacle of the pains of death is gone by; the funeral day is past. We feel she is at peace. . . . She died in a time of promise. We saw her taken from life in its prime. But it is God's will, and the place where she is gone is better than that she has left.'

But this sense of peace which follows funerals was not to last, and in the same letter are already forebodings of another passing: 'I now look at Anne, and wish she were well and strong; but she is neither; nor is papa.' The poor old man constantly said to his daughter: 'Charlotte, you must bear up; I shall sink if you fail me.' Thus ended the year which had witnessed the triumph of *Jane Eyre*.

A few months earlier Charlotte had begun her novel, *Shirley*. Emily was the original of the haughty heroine, and the book had been undertaken as a labour of love. She was compelled to lay it aside. Charlotte passionately loved the art of writing, and had taken more pleasure in the composition of *Jane Eyre* than in its success. But her character was in no way deformed by her literary talent, as too often happens, and herein lay her true greatness. She was, before everything else, a woman living her life with intensity, with seriousness and courage, and never confused the artificial elements of her craft with the poignant realities of life.

During her last remaining sister's illness, she never spoke a word about literature. She continued, however, to write to Mr. Williams, who had become more and more her friend, but it was to ease her heart of its burden, and she blamed herself for troubling her publishers with grief which could not possibly interest them.

'So circumstanced, my dear Sir, what claim have I on your friendship, what right to the comfort of your letters? My literary character is effaced for the time, and it is by that only you know me. Care of papa and Anne is necessarily my chief present object in life, to the exclusion of all that could give me interest with my publishers or their connections. Should Anne get better, I think I could rally and become Currer Bell once more, but if otherwise, I look no further.'

The same letter includes a singular avowal which makes it easier to understand the shock that Branwell's and Emily's death had caused her:

'I suspect now all this has been coming on for years. Unused, any of us, to the possession of robust health, we have not noticed the gradual approaches of decay; we did not know its symptoms: the little cough, the small appetite, the tendency to take cold at every variation of atmosphere, have been regarded as things of course. I see them in another light now.'

And so she continually saw Anne as a bird ready to take flight, and the many phases of her anxiety take heart-breaking form in her letters.

Anne had always been gentle, so extremely gentle that the sympathy she excited was full of troubled tenderness. Her wishes had always been those of the rest of the family, and so they continued to be during the five long months of her last illness. Her complete submissiveness to Charlotte, her docile resignation, drew tears from her elder sister as Emily's fierce energy had done. Anne accepted doctors and remedies, and submitted to severe external treatment; she took cod-liver oil, which at that time was horribly nauseating. She was willing to talk about her illness, to discuss her chances of recovery, and never rejected the hope of being cured. She tried not to sadden her family, and to occupy as little room as possible. She wrote to Miss Nussey, whom she wanted for a companion in case she should be sent away for a change of air: 'I hope I should not be very troublesome.' This was her constant preoccupation.

Charlotte soon knew the truth. A physician whom she had promptly sent for from Leeds had told her. Her days went by, slow and sombre, and in the night she awoke in anguish, missing her little sister from her bed. There were frequent changes in Anne's

condition, however. She endured intermittently the pain in the arms which sometimes tortures consumptives. She grew thinner, but on some days suffered very little. Charlotte longed for the springtime. It seemed to her that, March – a terrible month in that climate – once passed, she could take her invalid to some quiet spot on the seashore. Nevertheless, her letters written at this period are full of a despair scarcely veiled by religion and the courage which never left her, a bitterness which her pregnant words convey to the most indifferent reader: 'I avoid looking forward or backward, and try to keep looking upward. This is not the time to regret, dread, or weep. What I have and ought to do is very distinctly laid out for me; what I want, and pray for, is strength to perform it.'

March passed, and April came, and Anne began to speak more frequently of going to Scarborough. She hoped, as I have said, that Ellen Nussey would accompany her, while Charlotte remained with Mr. Brontë. She wrote her a touching, almost supplicating letter; but Charlotte had warned her friend to seek pretexts for not going: she knew that Anne might die without warning, and that this journey would almost inevitably be her last.

In her letter to Miss Nussey, Anne calmly referred to what might happen to her:

'I have no horror of death: if I thought it inevitable, I think I could quietly resign myself to the prospect, in the hope that you, dear Miss Nussey, would give as much of your company as you possibly could to Charlotte, and be a sister to her in my stead. But I wish it would please God to spare me, not only

for papa's and Charlotte's sakes, but because I long to do some good in the world before I leave it. I have many schemes in my head for future practice – humble and limited indeed – but still I should not like them all to come to nothing. . . . But God's will be done.'

Mrs. Gaskell thought it was probably at this time that Anne composed the canticle of resignation already referred to, and which is, in fact, in entire harmony with these sentiments:

'I hoped that with the brave and strong
My portioned task might lie;
To toil amid the busy throng,
With purpose pure and high.

But God has fixed another part,
And He has fixed it well:
I said so with my bleeding heart
When first the anguish fell.

. . . . . .

These weary hours will not be lost,
These days of misery –
These nights of darkness, anguish-tost –
Can I but turn to Thee.

. . . . . .

Thus let me serve Thee from my heart,
Whate'er may be my written fate;
Whether thus early to depart,
Or yet a while to wait.

If Thou shouldst bring me back to life,
More humbled I should be;
More wise – more strengthened for the strife,
More apt to lean on Thee.

Should death be standing at the gate,
Thus should I keep my vow;
But, Lord, whatever be my fate,
Oh! let me serve Thee now!'

These verses are still sung frequently, and bring resignation to the hearts of thousands. One of Anne's humble plans was thus realized without her knowing it, but it is her life that has given virtue to her simple lines.

The letter to Miss Nussey was written April 5. Good weather did not come until the end of the month, and when it came Anne was not better, but worse. However, as she continued to wish to go to Scarborough, Charlotte engaged two rooms in a boarding-house favourably situated on the cliff. It was agreed that Miss Nussey should join Charlotte and Anne at a station on the way. Charlotte awaited their departure with a heavy heart. The weakness of the invalid increased daily, and anything might be feared from the crisis which would surely follow the excitement of the journey.

They left Haworth the 24th of May, missing Miss Nussey at Leeds, who decided, after waiting for them a long time, to go on to Scarborough without them. Anne was so feeble that she had to be carried everywhere by the railroad employees. They stopped for one day at York as Anne wished to see the Cathedral once more. The sight of the noble monument made an extraordinary impression upon her. 'If finite power can do this,' she said, 'what is the . . .' Emotion overpowered her, and she could not finish her sentence.

On the evening of the 25th they reached Scar-

borough, Anne in a high state of excitement from all she had seen. The following day she rode in a little donkey cart on the beach, taking the reins herself for fear the driver would overtire the poor little animal. She had often visited Scarborough with the parents of her pupils, and she showed Charlotte and Ellen all her favourite views in the bay.

On Sunday, the 26th, she would have liked to go to church, but was not allowed to do so. She walked with difficulty, and merely to go from one room to another exhausted her. After every such effort she joined her hands and prayed fervently, although she had never much practised the external demonstrations of religion. This Sunday was a magnificent day, and they took Anne again to the beach where she sat on the sand and asked them to leave her alone until it became cooler.

The sun went down in a blaze of glory.

They had placed her arm-chair near a window, and for a long time she looked at the sea, the ships and the country-house on the cliff which was reddened by the fires of the setting sun. When darkness obliterated this vision, she asked suddenly if it would not be wise to take her home to Haworth. Next morning she rose at seven o'clock and dressed herself without aid. Shortly before midday she asked again, insistently, if it would not be possible to take her back to Haworth. She said that she felt her life passing away. The doctor was sent for and came. She asked him the same question, demanding to know how much longer she had to live. The doctor told her the truth, that the angel of death was not far away. She joined her hands to ask God's blessing, first on Charlotte, and then on her friend. 'Be a sister in my

stead,' she said to Miss Nussey. 'Give Charlotte as much of your company as you can.' Her life was passing slowly away. They had laid her on a sofa, and asked if she were easier. 'It is not *you* who can give me ease,' she said to them, ' but soon all will be well through the merits of our Redeemer.' At about two o'clock, a minute after saying that she was very happy, her eyes dimmed, and an instant later she was gone, without a sigh. Her last hours had been so calm, she had so well kept her promise not to give trouble, that the hotel people were unaware that she was dying. As she passed away, the door was partly opened to announce dinner.

Charlotte did not write her father until the following day. On Wednesday, accompanied only by Ellen and a friend of the latter, who discreetly followed the coffin, she left her last and youngest sister in the cemetery at Scarborough.

★

It required years, it required all Charlotte's celebrity, and the success of her *Life* by Mrs. Gaskell, to evoke the name of Anne, her pale sweet face, and her sorrowful, simple verse from the obscurity that immediately closed down on her grave.

Emily also had to wait. Her poetry, which of all her work is the most like herself, has been appreciated at its true value for scarcely thirty years. Her novel would still be unknown had there not been a rapid evolution in English taste. This evolution, however, was near even at the time of Emily's death, and as early as 1849 a young critic, Mr. Sydney Dobell, showed in the *Palladium* that he felt the greatness of *Wuthering Heights* in which his older fellow-critics had only seen extravagance and lack of modesty. But it was through the appreciation of Matthew Arnold and Swinburne that the novel joined the ranks of immortal books – immortal if not perfect, which *Wuthering Heights* is far from being. Yet from the time the article appeared in the *Palladium*, Emily's admirers continually increased.

Wuthering Heights does not in any manner resemble the works of Charlotte and hardly those of any other novelist. As Miss Brontë said, it is a pure product of the moors, and of an imagination feeding upon itself. Only its background, its appearance, are indicated in describing it as rustic. It is true that 'Wuthering Heights' is the name of a farm where nearly all the action of the story takes place, a large and ancient farm of sinister aspect, with its gate fastened by chains, its neglected garden, its great gloomy hall with a capacious fireplace and dark recesses from which rough ladders mount, through

the tangle of beams, to the roof open up to its ridge. Two or three taciturn, ill-natured peasants pass to and fro, kicking from their path the wicked dogs that haunt the place. They speak the rudest of northern dialects. The novel is full of brutality: there are fights constantly, blood flows, women are beaten, children hang puppies to the backs of chairs in corners where they knock each other about. Several times a sense of irresistible terror gives the reader goose flesh, and deprives him of strength to go on with the tale. The cruelty of certain scenes is revolting, as when Heathcliff prepares to martyrize his consumptive son. Roughness, even brutality, belong to the country, but not cruelty. But there is much more in *Wuthering Heights* than rusticity, or even savagery. It is full of a wild passion whose violence makes us promptly forget the details of its background. The drama itself might occur in any place and at any other epoch.

One evening, returning from a journey, Mr. Earnshaw, the owner of 'Wuthering Heights' when it was still a peaceful and happy farm, dropped from the folds of his cloak a strange little creature whom he had picked up in the street. This little Bohemian is adopted, and named Heathcliff. Mr. Earnshaw has two children, a boy, Hindley, and a girl, Catherine. Hindley is brutal to the little stranger, but Catherine adores him and they become inseparable friends: as to the farmer, he always takes the part of the boy whom he has saved from a wretched death. Heathcliff is an enigma, a being of another race and, it would almost seem, from another sphere. He is crafty and courageous, cruel to those who suffer, dastardly in betraying others, miserly, impassioned and

silent. As he grows up, his chief characteristic is his attachment for Catherine. All that the soul of a child is capable of feeling he experiences in this affection.

A few miles from 'Wuthering Heights' stands a sort of farm-country-house, 'Thrushcross Grange,' occupied by its rich proprietor whose name is Linton. When she is about fifteen years old Catherine goes to pass a few weeks with these neighbours. When she returns, she is much changed. The little girl who galloped over the moors astride of her pony returns as an elegant horsewoman, speaking correctly, holding herself well, laughing at everything which she now finds boorish in her father's house, and at Heathcliff more than all the rest. A flame of fury springs up in the eyes of the dark-faced youth. Catherine is already engaged to Edgar Linton, the refined, indolent son of the owner of 'Thrushcross Grange.' They ask her whom she likes best, Edgar or Heathcliff, and the question strikes her as absurd. Heathcliff is like herself – one does not marry oneself. The ceremony takes place and Catherine goes away. But Heathcliff remains and with an inextinguishable thirst for he knows not what, though little by little he realizes that it is a thirst for vengeance demanded by his insane hatred of those who took Catherine away from him, and for Catherine herself. Soon afterwards he disappears, and nothing is heard of him for years.

When he returns he is a tall man of military bearing, almost distinguished, with a sarcastic and often sinister way of speaking. He has money. He meets Hindley in an inn where, ever since the death of his father, he has been occupied in ruining himself. They play cards together, and Hindley loses so

much that he is obliged to yield to the will of Heathcliff, who settles in his victim's home and soon makes himself master there while Hindley drinks himself stupid. Heathcliff would like to see Catherine, now Mrs. Edgar Linton, frequently, but her husband prevents it. Heathcliff then undertakes a well-thought-out plan of vengeance. He manages to hasten the decadence of Hindley, and has his only son, Hareton, brought up like a savage. The degradation of the father and the ignorance of the son are a constantly refreshing sight to him. In the same way, he courts Edgar Linton's sister, Isabelle, elopes with her and marries her. They have a son whom he calls Linton Heathcliff and whom he detests as he has always detested the mother, even when he carried her off and married her.

Meanwhile Catherine dies in childbed after having had a last interview with Heathcliff, in which they give the rein to the passion which has always consumed them both. Heathcliff adores her, dead, as he has hated her when she lived. He could not support an hour of life did he not feel that she haunted him. He is sustained by his belief in her invisible presence, and her death only deprives him of the feelings which were the only brake on his impulses. Catherine has left a daughter named after herself. She grows up. The day comes when Isabelle dies, and her sickly offspring is taken to 'Thrushcross Grange.' The second Catherine loves him immediately. A last diabolical plan is conceived in the brain of Heathcliff. He comes to take back his son, and brings him up with great care although he hates him; he contrives to have him meet Catherine and make her love him, selfish and prematurely old as the

young man is. Heathcliff's plan succeeds, after a daring contrivance, and the two are married. The woeful young husband soon dies, but his father's vengeance is satisfied. He is now the master of 'Thrushcross Grange' as well as 'Wuthering Heights.' No one is now left but the second Catherine whom he martyrizes in her turn. He himself dies at last, in a horrible transport of satisfied hatred. They bury him by night, like a dog, but he has bribed the grave-digger to place his body in the same grave with her whom he loved. His bones, at least, will be mingled with hers.

This *résumé* indicates the improbabilities, impossibilities and crudities of all sorts which abound in *Wuthering Heights*, more than in *Jane Eyre*. But it does not show the complication of the plot. Emily begins her novel by the end, as many contemporary story-tellers do, the narration is doubled and we hear the story of a story. It would require a prodigious effort of memory to reproduce the sequence of events in the order in which she has chosen to place them. Even reading it demands sustained attention. The reader is involuntarily inclined to design genealogical trees, but even this does not obviate the necessity of reading many pages before he feels sure of the relationship between the second Catherine and Heathcliff.

These defects and the childish simplicity of the idea of the book are found somewhat shocking at a first reading; at the second reading they are set aside, and if the book has sufficiently impressed the reader to draw him back again, he no longer feels anything but its extraordinary charm. *Wuthering Heights* is one of those rare works of art from which art seems

to have entirely disappeared, leaving nothing but passion in its place.

The diabolical aspect of Heathcliff's character was distinctly shocking to respectable criticism in 1848. Even Charlotte wonders if it is wise to create such beings. Such questions do not interest us nowadays. Heathcliff the demon seems to us simply romantic; and here we find, as well as in the scenes of terror in the novel, the influence of Emily's incursions into German literature. This is the least original and the only perishable part of her talent. The same cannot be said of the dominant sexuality which pervades the whole book. This also revolted English readers, and for years it seemed abominable that a girl, the daughter of a clergyman, should have written with what was called such licence.

It is useless to discuss a reproach which no longer exists. Charlotte tried to defend her sister by saying, with profound intuition, that she had not been conscious of what she was doing. From the purely psychological point of view this is an admirable dictum. There is not a line, not a word in *Wuthering Heights* which evokes a sensual idea. Even the scene – marvellous in its impossibility – where Heathcliff and Catherine throw themselves in each other's arms with cries of passion that sound like torture, could not be disparaged except by an impure imagination. Singularly enough, when we read *Wuthering Heights*, when we see the souls of the two prodigious heroines flame up when Heathcliff or Linton appears, it is not of Phèdre that we immediately think, though the same tempestuous emotion is gradually felt, but we think of Miss Austen and her marriages, or even of children's tales read long ago. The idea of love is

as pure, as bare, in the mind of Emily as the idea and the word marriage are for children. Certain details, indeed, would imply the ignorance of perfect innocence. Love as she conceives and describes it is too troubled to be attributed to some celestial sphere in which angels lived the life of men, but would be perfectly consistent in a world of impassioned and bodiless spirits. Love is a sovereign attraction in which matter plays no part, but of which souls are the unresisting playthings.

Exceptional lyrical power was necessary to sustain this effect throughout a whole volume. Emily possessed it. No one gives as much as she the impression of easy strength. But she has in addition a clarity of realistic vision which is constantly effective in words of such simple and profound truth that they form a princely ransom for the improbabilities she imagines. We no longer feel that we are listening to a girl, but to a woman who has lived several lives. The basic childishness of the conception disappears as if it had never existed. Read the dying reproaches of Catherine to Heathcliff:

'"I wish I could hold you," she continued, bitterly, "till we were both dead! I shouldn't care what you suffered. I care nothing for your sufferings. Why shouldn't *you* suffer? I do!" ' And, farther on, the end of Heathcliff's reproaches to Catherine: ' "I have not broken your heart – *you* have broken it; and in breaking it, you have broken mine. So much the worse for me that I am strong. Do I want to live? What kind of living will it be when you – oh, God! would *you* like to live with your soul in the grave?" '

Many other examples could be quoted in which

passion expresses itself in subtleties which are truer than the apparent simplicity of a less highly charged emotion. Who would undertake to make a character speak words of love to a dead woman lying in her open tomb? Emily's genius constantly meets such tests. This profound human truth is aided by the reality – extremely impressive to us – of the background, the characters, the atmosphere of the story. We feel, in the workmanship, the same unseizable something that makes the perfection of nature itself. A creation like Joseph, the old pharasaical peasant, with his sermons and Bible, is enough to immortalize a book. The poetry of the moors, the great singing wind-open limitless horizons throughout the whole tale, while the familiar poetry of flowery banks, of hollow rocks, and old walls covered with vegetation, bring it back within our own scale and give us a sense of security. Emily is mistress of this symphony, and her words, simple and ancient, evoke much more than they describe. For her genius appears also in the form with which she clothes this extraordinary story. Hers is the language of the people, as Shakespeare would have spoken it had he remained all his life at Stratford, marvellously simple, direct and shaded in meaning – and always, as well as here, broadened and enriched by a sort of infused knowledge or interior activity which is as skilful in results as the erudition of the greatest writers.

The book is not lacking in colourful local peculiarities, but Emily, even when reduced to everyday language, handles them differently from other people. There is a quality in her English which makes it seem like an entirely new language. In style, in the characters and in their nature, all is

simple and elementary in this miraculous book, but all is raised to a power only attained by the rarest genius. A singular effect is produced. Books that one had always believed to be masterpieces of naturalism – George Eliot's best, for instance – seem feebler, and more literary in comparison. One relizes that it is a wrong to *Wuthering Heights* to call it a novel. It is a sort of Homeric poem where all the details are true, but in which, however, there is perceived something unreal. The truth, but not of this world. That is the fault in the book, a lack of equilibrium and harmony, something troubling like a dream or, too often, a nightmare. But this is also its magic. Emily has had the unusual power to believe herself and to make us believe in characters and events of which a fifteen-year-old boy could demonstrate the impossibility.

What would she have produced, had she lived? Would she have learned to make more sober use of her astonishing creative power, or would she have repeated *Wuthering Heights*? Mystery. We do not even know if she had the material for another story of the moors. Her verses tell us nothing of what might have been the development of her prose. They have nothing in common but their originality, and at the age of sixteen Emily had achieved more than once the perfection of her own manner. Of one thing we may be sure, that she would never have written anything which did not bear the mark of her lofty nature, her natural and rare touch. It is to this thought we must always return when we try to understand the impression she leaves. Her art, as well as her life, isolates her, and we always get glimpses of her far away in inaccessible paths.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*

CHARLOTTE did not return to Haworth, as she might have been expected to do, immediately after the burial of her sister. She was at the end of her strength, and Anne's death had been so peaceful that Scarborough and its cemetery offered her fewer lugubrious visions than the house where Branwell and Emily had left their terrible memories. Her father himself felt this, and wrote her to stay on. So she remained with Ellen Nussey for two weeks, in the same boarding-house on the cliff.

When she returned a favourable reaction set in, and she went on with her novel, writing the last volume in less than three months. She could not, however, prevent herself from writing into it the memory of her mourning, and borrowed from old Bunyan the title of her twenty-fourth chapter: The Valley of the Shadow of Death.[1]

Shirley appeared at the end of October, 1849. The success of *Jane Eyre* had prepared the public, and criticism – except for an article in *The Times* which made poor Charlotte weep – was immediately favourable. The position she now occupied as a novelist may be realized from the fact that the *Revue des Deux Mondes* published a long study of *Shirley* by Eugéne Forcade during the month following the appearance of the book. This criticism seemed to

[1] We read this passage there: 'Night after night . . . the supplicant may cry for mercy with that soundless voice the soul utters when its appeal is to the Invisible. "Spare my beloved," it may implore. "Heal my life's life. Rend not from me what long affection entwines with my whole nature. God of heaven – bend – hear – be clement!" . . . Then the watcher approaches the patient's pillow, and sees a new and strange moulding of the familiar features, feels at once that the insufferable moment draws nigh.'

Charlotte by far the most intelligent of all, and she referred several times to the pleasure it had given her.

In November she went to London, partly to consult a physician, but much more to please her publishers, and there she met Thackeray, her hero, and Miss Martineau, with her masculine brain and iron will, to whom she at once became attached. Her father had asked her to go to see as many collections of arms and armour as she could, of which he knew nothing except from his reading, and when she returned home she was able to entertain him often with her descriptions of the steel harness in Prince Albert's Gallery.

One day Martha, a young domestic engaged to assist Tabby, who was now over eighty years old, rushed to her mistress saying: 'I've heard sich news!' –'What about?' –'Please, ma'am, you've been and written two books – the grandest books that ever was seen. My father has heard it at Halifax, and Mr. George Taylor, and Mr. Greenwood, and Mr. Merrall at Bradford, and they are going to have a meeting at the Mechanics' Institute, and to settle about ordering them.'

Charlotte's secret had been discovered by an inhabitant of the region, born at Haworth, who had recognized several of the characters in *Shirley*, and knew but one person in all the countryside who could have drawn them. All Haworth was full of enthusiasm,[1] except, naturally, the curates who are so cruelly handled throughout the whole book: but

[1] The custodian of the Haworth museum, a country girl of eighteen, was reading *Shirley* while the author of this book was examining the Brontë relics.

even they were consoled in time by the fact of being immortalized.

Charlotte was more happy than vexed to find herself a prophet in her own country, but curiosity was soon added to interest, and people came from distances in carriages, on Sundays, to see her in church, and of this sort of popularity she had a horror.

Mr. Brontë was very proud of his daughter's glory, and did the honours of the house with singular dignity. He always saw his Charlotte in the author of *Jane Eyre*, but as long as she lived he knew how to speak of her 'genius' without either bragging or ridicule. Many people have chattered about Mr. Brontë.[1] All his letters, even those written as he approached the age of eighty, express a mind above the ordinary, and with a nobility of tone not to be expected nowadays. One day he brought to Charlotte a bundle of yellowed letters – they were those written to him by his wife long years before, at the beginning of the century, when they were engaged, and his hard time of probation was drawing to a close. In this action of an old man there were youthfulness of sentiment, delicacy and tact not to be found in a common nature. Charlotte was profoundly moved.[2]

The affection of her servants was also precious to her. She wrote to Martha during all her journeys, signing herself her very sincere friend. She looked upon Tabby, from whom she had energetically refused to separate herself fifteen years earlier, as an old nurse. The poor old woman was a bit jealous

[1] No one more incorrectly than M. Maeterlinck.

[2] These letters of Mrs. Brontë's are very well written, deliciously old-fashinoned, virginal and reticent.

of Martha, and in the morning would watch for the postman so as to receive the letters herself. She had become entirely deaf, and from time to time Charlotte took her out to the meadows which divide the parsonage from the moors, and shouted into her ears any news she thought might interest her.

Mr. Nicholls, Charlotte's future husband, had been for six years at Haworth. He was not, however, caricatured in *Shirley*, and at this time Charlotte would no longer have judged him as she once did in the letter we have quoted; for he rendered great service to Mr. Brontë and was daily seen at the parsonage.

During the three years subsequent to the publication and the success of *Shirley*, that is, from the beginning of 1850 to the beginning of 1853, Charlotte again fell into the state of nervous depression in which we have several times seen her. Her surroundings suffocated her, and the anniversaries which recurred every year at intervals caused her bitter suffering. Her health remained bad; frequent pains in her side or sore throats reminded her that she was the sister of Emily and of Anne, and probably frightened her. In spite of the journeys her friends compelled her to undertake, her solitude weighed heavily upon her.

'I wonder how you are spending these long winter evenings,' she wrote to Miss Wooler. 'Alone, probably, like me.' The sad rhythm of this short sentence was that of her life. Always she felt her loneliness, and at intervals succumbed to it.

'Now and then the silence of the house, the solitude of the room, has pressed on me with a weight I

found it difficult to bear, and recollection has not failed to be as alert, poignant, obtrusive, as other feelings were languid. I attribute this state of things partly to the weather . . . and I have ere this been warned of approaching disturbance in the atmosphere by a sense of bodily weakness, and deep, heavy, mental sadness, such as some would call *presentiment*. . . . I cannot help feeling something of the excitement of expectation till the post hour comes and when, day after day, it brings nothing, I get low. This is a stupid, disgraceful, unmeaning state of things. I feel bitterly vexed at my own dependence and folly; but it is so bad for the mind to be quite alone, and to have none with whom to talk over little crosses and disappointments, and to laugh them away.'

She had kept up the habit of walking in the house until eleven o'clock at night as she had done with her sisters, and it is easy to divine what sad visions, what realization of overwhelming loneliness would come to a mind thus driven back upon itself. Sometimes she had an impulse to fly from Haworth, or she wrote to Ellen Nussey that she was at the end of her strength, and that it was necessary she should come to her assistance. But hardly would Ellen be gone than she would fall back again into the same condition.

'I was better during her visit, but had a relapse soon after she left me, which reduced my strength very much. It cannot be denied that the solitude of my position fearfully aggravated its other evils. Some long stormy days and nights there were, when

I felt such a craving for support and companionship as I cannot express. Sleepless, I lay awake night after night, weak and unable to occupy myself. I sat in my chair day after day, the saddest memories my only company . . . but God sent it, and it must have been for the best.'

She sometimes feared that she would become embittered. Mary Taylor, upon the death of her last sister in New Zealand, wrote to Charlotte that in her loneliness she was afraid of growing 'stern, harsh, selfish.' 'This fear struck home; again and again have I felt it for myself.'

Haworth was by far too melancholy, too shut in. Even the moors, where she went to walk the moment she felt better, were too memory-haunted; odds and ends of Emily's verses, bits of melancholy stanzas, followed her there.

For three years her correspondence is expressive only of an unhappy woman struggling against a torrent of sorrow.

Literary pursuits helped her but little. This great artist had none of the lesser resources of the usual literary woman. This was one of her characteristics: the woman in her overwhelmed everything else. She never thought of her books but with a sensation of fatigue, and a fear of never doing equally well again. Others would have found satisfaction in the recollection of the sensational success of *Jane Eyre*, of the name of Currer Bell becoming famous almost overnight in English-speaking countries, of Thackeray's admiration, of the deference paid her by a powerful publisher like Smith. She had none of these ideas. As she wrote Sydney Dobell, after a triumph she

quickly became again simply the daughter of a village clergyman.

It is surprising that *Villette*, of which certain parts are brilliant, could have been written during this period. She was long in beginning it. Mr. Smith had at first proposed that she should write a novel in monthly instalments, as Dickens and Thackeray did. This idea shocked her. She placed her artistic ideals too high to allow herself to write on the chance of inspiration. When she had finally begun *Villette* her publishers often wrote to inquire concerning its progress. One of the phantoms that habitually haunted her was the fear of a failure that might cool the interest of 'Cornhill' in her work. Her publishers' impatience only increased her dread of disappointing them. At length, she begged them not to make any allusion whatever to her work.

The Messrs. Smith frequently insisted on her leaving her work and coming to London for a bit of distraction. Many times these invitations arrived at the very moment when she longed for this circle of intelligent and sympathetic people; but she would always find all sorts of objections: her father daily depended more and more upon her; she would have to return too soon to the sadness of the home; a certain fear of gossip (on one of her preceding journeys it had been said that she neglected the Sabbath Day, and had been seen at a ball and at the opera); but more than all else, her terror of being pointed out and stared at.

Charlotte Brontë's timidity had become greater, if possible, than when, at Brussels, she had discouraged the attentions of her friends. Mrs. Gaskell gives unbelievable examples of her shyness: walking back

and forth for half an hour before the door of a girl who had invited her to come, and deciding not to enter; disappearing from the drawing-room when visitors were announced, and emerging flushed and embarrassed from behind the curtains after their departure, etc.

Mrs. Ritchie, Thackeray's daughter, tells how her father having invited several congenial people to meet her, she sat absolutely silent, Thackeray, sparkling conversationalist as he was, trying in vain to rouse her, until a painful sense of embarrassment spread through the party, and Thackeray, at the end of his resources, slipped out, motioning quietly to his daughter that he was going to escape to his Club. But if she was in the company of a very small group of friends, at Mrs. Gaskell's, for instance, or Mrs. Smith's, and if the subject of their talk was one which greatly interested her, and upon which it required some courage to express an opinion, she at once spoke, and spoke very well, her large grey eyes lighting up her face.

During these last years she made four journeys to London, the first time seeing only a physician, the Smiths and some shows. Her last visit was chiefly on business concerning the publication of *Villette*. The other two were interesting: during the first she came into touch with writers whom she had hitherto known only in their books or their criticisms of her own works – Thackeray, 'the Grand Turk and grand pagan,' whom she liked immediately and rebuked endlessly, with the simplicity of genius, for his paganism, his cynicism, his hatred of women and everything in general which displeased her in her great man; Lewes, in whom she found a

resemblance to Emily which absorbed her to the exclusion of all the rest; Miss Kavanagh, a very talented young Irishwoman, who was poor and worked to support her mother. Charlotte made an arrangement with Mr. Smith whereby half her royalties on her sisters' books should be transferred to this young woman. She also met Richmond, who painted her portrait,[1] and made for her a copy of his Duke of Wellington, which Tabby declared was the portrait of Mr. Brontë.

Some of Charlotte's friends took her back to Haworth by way of Edinburgh, which had been one of her dreams, and of which the reality ravished her. In comparison, London seemed to her 'a great, rumbling, rambling, heavy epic,' while Edinburgh affected her like 'a lyric, brief, bright, clear, and vital as a flash of lightning.'

The journey of June, 1851, introduced her to the great world. Thackeray had just been making literary lectures fashionable, and Charlotte arranged to attend his discourse on Fielding. Before beginning, Thackeray came to shake hands with her, and seated her near his mother. This public attention had somewhat startled her, when a gentleman sitting behind her asked permission to introduce himself as a Yorkshire man and compatriot; she had the perspicacity to see that he must be Lord Carlisle. A moment later another Yorkshire man also asked permission to present himself to her: this was Moncton Milnes (later Lord Houghton); after this, Dr. Forbes introduced himself. During this time Thackeray had been pointing her out to other people, so that when the lecture was finished and he had come to ask her

[1] Now in the National Gallery.

opinion of it, two lines of aristocratic personages had been formed between which she was obliged to pass, ready to drop with embarrassment.

A few days later she was invited to the Marquis of Westminster's – who obtained her acceptance not without difficulty – and by Lord Ellesmere; she was present at one of the luncheons given by old Rogers; she was taken to an exhibition by Sir David Brewster; she saw Rachel, whose acting filled her with admiration and horror; in short, against her will she was lionized. Her letters to her father in which she recounts all these social successes are written in just the right tone. Few fashionable novelists, of any time or country, have been capable of such tact. For this, qualities were required which the practice of literature takes away rather than gives.

This journey gave her also one of her rare opportunities to hear music. Her feeling for music was extremely sensitive, and her taste turned naturally to its rarest expression.

Outside of these trips to London, which were real events in her life, her friends in the North sometimes persuaded her to leave home for a few days. She remained very faithful, it is needless to say, to Ellen Nussey and to Miss Wooler, even though the latter had deeply wounded her by writing her one day that she still possessed all her esteem whatever her novels might be. Charlotte's reply was not long in reaching Miss Wooler.

Among her new acquaintances some were very dear to her. She became great friends with Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth, her neighbour in the moors, who has already been mentioned. One summer he invited her to visit him in a house he had taken at

Bowness, a pretty village on the shores of Lake Windermere. This graceful landscape, and the soft light which enveloped the valleys, ravished her. The constantly changing sky was also a source of continual pleasure to her. It was during this sojourn that she first met Mrs. Gaskell, whose friendship immediately became one of the delights of her life, and whom she visited once or twice at Manchester. Miss Martineau was not then at Ambleside, which lay a few miles from Bowness, and where she usually stayed, but Charlotte returned there next year to see her.

Miss Martineau was a singular woman. She was then approaching fifty years of age. She was tall and strong, with the air of an amazon, a great reader, a great walker, rising every morning at five, and walking by starlight as soon as she had finished an icy bath, possessing a masculine brain which no problem, no research could daunt, a theologian more than bold, whom contradiction left quite indifferent, and who loved her ideas better than her friends; with a dominating character which easily became despotic, passionately doing good, but doing it with an iron hand which must not be resisted: briefly, a powerful nature which could not fail to subjugate the delicate weakness of Charlotte, always obedient except when it was a question of ideas. For a long time she was carried along by the torrential force of this friend; but after the publication of *Villette* she learned, to her sorrow, that it is not always wise for weakness to lean on strength. She had asked Miss Martineau if she saw any foundation for the often repeated reproach of her critics that she lacked womanly delicacy. Miss Martineau replied not only in an intimate letter but

in the columns of the *Daily News*, that she could not approve the fact that all the women in Miss Brontë's novels should be wholly given over to love, as if there could be nothing else in a woman's life, and that it was not a question of prudery but of truth to life. It was exactly the reply that such a Diana would not fail to make to such a Psyche. But Charlotte did not accept this verdict: 'I know what *love* is as I understand it; and if man or woman should be ashamed of feeling such love, then is there nothing right, noble, faithful, truthful, unselfish in this earth, as I comprehend rectitude, nobleness, fidelity, truth and disinterestedness. To differ with you gives me keen pain.'

In fact, nobody in the world was more incapable than Charlotte of subordinating morality to art, and the supremacy in her of true womanliness is strikingly evident throughout her whole life. The thought that another woman, a friend, could boast of an ideal superior to hers was insupportable to her. They met no more, and ceased even to write. However, in her *Biographical Sketches* Miss Martineau has devoted a few admiring pages to her former friend.

Charlotte's correspondence during these years is, in spite of obstacles, rather voluminous. Its characteristic is an evident leaning towards candour, restrained not less evidently by reticence. There is no difference between her letters to Sydney Dobell, a purely literary acquaintance, and those she wrote to Ellen Nussey, except in the gradations of style. She immediately tells much to anybody who has won her sympathy, but to nobody does she tell all. Perhaps she had no conception of what is called intimate correspondence and which, well analysed, generally reveals more weakness than strength, more twaddle

than sincerity, and more self-complaisance than genuine friendship. A thoroughly frank correspondence often reflects a shallow life. One may open his soul to his friend as effectively by a general statement, as the ancients did, as by an effusion of confidences. Charlotte gives the impression of a simple woman who attached more importance to living her life than to telling about it. Neither is there any 'literature' in these letters; I mean nothing decorated or far-fetched. She writes straightforwardly: sometimes, if it is worth while, with singular charm, always with discipline and dignity, but never as in her books. Not much wit, and when it occurs it is heavy; few landscapes; facts, simple, honest bits of news; sentiments; perfectly frank opinions upon what is happening or being written, and sometimes rapid sketches of people. Throughout the correspondence we are conscious of seriousness, of sincerity, and a penetration which causes the reader to covet solid qualities before coming under her scrutiny. There is an absence of the lesser graces, and one feels that they would be displeasing here.

Charlotte's principal correspondents, besides Ellen Nussey and Miss Wooler – the letters to Miss Taylor having been lost – were Miss Martineau, Mrs. Gaskell, Mr. George Smith and his mother, Mr. Williams and, more rarely, James Taylor, Sydney Dobell and Lewes. The most interesting letters are those addressed to the men at 'Cornhill,' George Smith and Williams. Charlotte had a profound gratitude to them for having treated her with humanity and respect at a time when she was turned away on all sides and full of despair. She felt herself to be one of them. There is no reason for believing,

however, that Mr. Smith paid her any attentions as an author that he would not have paid to her as a woman. He was a smiling young man, more witty than intelligent, a business man without doubt, but with the attractive qualities which the continual handling of books never fails to give to anybody not incurably prosaic. George Smith was, without the least doubt, an elegant person. Charlotte lectured him a bit, gently and affectionately.

Mr. Williams is hidden in shadow, and this is regrettable. He was a gentle, modest, timid man, limiting himself to his rôle of literary adviser to the Smiths, but in reading Charlotte's replies to him we divine in her correspondent a fine and tender nature, an intelligence which had remained fresh in spite of a somewhat withering profession, – probably because the conscience and sympathies of the man quickened the perceptions of the critic, – and a heart born for pure friendship. Charlotte was conscious of all this, and we feel, in reading her letters, that another woman might easily have abused it. Williams would have made an admirable prey. But for Charlotte, with her moral nobility, her lively and discreet sympathy, there was nothing but the subtle influence of the invisible flower that perfumes the depths of serious lives. Her letters to Williams, if carefully read, reveal her woman's and artist's soul more completely than all the others.

Packages of new books, which her publishers thought might interest Charlotte, were constantly arriving from Cornhill – so often indeed that, though she adored books, she was sometimes compelled to protest. In return, her letters to them are full of literary appreciations, or, we ought rather to say, full

of impressions of books, for these impressions are almost never literary but moral. If we had no guide outside these letters themselves, we should never suspect that the writer was an author. It is true that we could not doubt her artistic sensibility, but she expressed herself with a spontaneity infinitely rare among professional writers, and always gave in to the moral element. Once Mrs. Gaskell sent her the plot of a novel upon which she was at work. There was not a word in Charlotte's reply about the plot or even the characters; she merely deplored, as Jenny the working girl might do, that the heroine should be sacrificed; but what struck and pleased her most was that the novel could restore courage and hope to those who had lost both.

She who chose and assembled words with infallible art would naturally be inclined to study the method of work of such an artisan as Ruskin. Not at all. She thinks only of his character, and all the attention she gives to his style is concentrated in one casual metaphor: ' "The Stones of Venice" seem nobly laid and chiselled. How grandly the quarry of vast marbles is disclosed! Mr. Ruskin seems to me one of the few genuine writers, as distinguished from book-makers, of this age. His earnestness even amuses me in certain passages; for I cannot help laughing to think how utilitarians will fume and fret over his deep, serious (and, as *they* will think), fanatical reverence for Art. That pure and severe mind you ascribed to him speaks in every line. He writes like a consecrated priest of the Abstract and Ideal.'

She appreciates perfectly the powerful and subtle art of Balzac, whose *Modeste Mignon* and *Illusions*

Perdues Lewes made her read in 1850, but her final opinion is exactly that of Mademoiselle Zénaide Fleuriot: 'These books leave a bad taste in the mouth; Balzac is not a congenial acquaintance.'

In fact, she likes George Sand better:

'Fantastic, fanatical, unpractical enthusiast as she often is – far from truthful as are many of her views of life – misled, as she is apt to be, by her feelings – George Sand has a better nature than M. de Balzac; her brain is larger, her heart warmer than his. Her *Lettres d'un Voyageur* are full of the writer's self; and I never felt so strongly, as in the perusal of this work, that most of her very faults spring from the excess of her good qualities. . . . But I believe her mind is of that order which disastrous experience teaches, without weakening, or too much disheartening, and, in that case, the longer she lives the better she will grow. A hopeful point in all her writings is the scarcity of false French sentiment . . . but the weed flourishes here and there even in the *Lettres*.'

The same spirit is felt in her innumerable allusions to Thackeray. He is her great man. She liked him long before knowing him, and his name alone figures on the first page of her writings. She has his portrait, of which she has studied the least details with the attention of a phrenologist: he is her 'giant,' her 'Grand Turk,' her 'Lion of Judah.' She loves his powerful satire, his sparkling gaiety, his basic good nature. She takes his *Paris Sketches* in small doses, for fear of finishing too soon. His badinage made up of Parisianism, studio talk and frosty humour frightens her a bit, but amuses her even more, and

she cannot resist borrowing from time to time some of his slang.[1]

Whenever she found her own art deficient she thought of him, admitting that she had neither his tact nor his easy perfection. In short, for her he was both Monsieur Héger and Rochester.

In spite of that, she spared him nothing. The first time he came to see her (he stayed two hours, but, as she pointed out, Mr. Smith was also in the room), she preached him a sermon on all his faults. He defended himself like a pagan, giving reasons which were still worse than his faults. She compared him to Ruskin, declaring that he had no love for his art or his work, that he neglected them, made a mock and a plaything of them. He had written a poem which, until the fourth stanza, was not poetry at all: she grieved to see him satisfied with so little. He had written a Christmas story, *Rebecca and Rowena*: she would have liked to condemn him to marry his heroine. She constantly fought him about his ideas of women, his portrait of Lady Castlewood, his indulgence for the anti-feminine calumnies of Fielding, etc.

Of the latter she had a horror, and Thackeray's boundless admiration for this Beelzebub saddened her. She listened without the slightest pleasure to his lecture on Fielding. She did not deem it right to describe a life so lacking in moral fibre as if it were a question of pure speculation and in no danger of being imitated. The memory of Branwell returned

[1] These borrowings did not go farther than such phrases as 'to bore' and 'to get on,' long since become familiar; but it was much for a person who preferred saying 'perusal' instead of reading, and 'retain' instead of keep.

to her with all its bitterness: Thackeray would speak and think otherwise if he had had a son just reaching manhood.

In all this, it is needless to say, there was not the least affectation, but only the intensity belonging to none but a candid soul. Charlotte might arouse antipathy in some, sympathy in others, but never doubt in anybody.

There would be much more of interest to glean from this correspondence. I should not forgive myself for omitting this judgment upon Tennyson's *In Memoriam*: 'It is beautiful; it is mournful; it is monotonous.' She did not read it through. She noticed casually the appearance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, without further comment at first, but little by little it became evident that she had a lively desire to know Mrs. Beecher Stowe. She read many novels written by women – perhaps merely because so many were published, for several that she admired are now totally forgotten. She had no fear of austere books, and a phrenologist who examined her, and whose observations seem to have been extraordinarily correct, declared that her brain was 'highly philosophical.' Her reading, however, did not in the least resemble that of George Eliot. In the metaphysical field she went no further than Miss Martineau and F. W. Newman, brother of the Cardinal, whose work *The Soul* she greatly admired, despite its coldness. On the other hand, she enjoyed historical and ethnological statements of facts, which interested her extremely on the rare occasions when she came across them.

The only classic she quotes in these numerous letters is Wordsworth, whose *Prelude* she sent to

Mrs. Gaskell, and the latter had noticed nothing but contemporary works in her friend's study. She would have done better to have asked for the reason. It would seem impossible that Charlotte Brontë, after having loved Shakespeare as she shows she did in the letter to Ellen Nussey which the reader has not forgotten, should have never reopened his works. The explanation must be that, having passed thirty-two years in the exclusive company of the English classics, which must have become as familiar to her as La Fontaine is to the French, and contemporary writers being entirely new to her, she could without infidelity consecrate to them for a few years her moments of leisure. There are books on which we live always without re-reading them: they have become a part of us, like our memories.[1]

On each occasion which presented itself, Charlotte spoke her mind on political and religious questions. She was in every respect a Conservative. The French of 1848 seemed to her rebels; the Puseyites, Newmanites, etc., *poseurs;* and as to the Catholics, whose rapid progress irritated her, she overwhelmed them with her taunts. She warned Mrs. Gaskell that she observed a growing sympathy in her for Catholics she had met – it was a cry of alarm; she complained that Julia Kavanagh had drawn a too moving portrait of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary: 'Papists clothe their priests in scarlet, and canonize all their good women.'

Despite ill-health, sorrows and tedious discouragements, there is a firmer note in the letters Charlotte

[1] Compare *Shirley*, p. 400: 'From these faded flowers Caroline had in her childhood extracted the honey – they were tasteless to her now.'

wrote after *Jane Eyre*. She was evidently more clearly conscious of herself, had formed her own ideas concerning happiness, friendship, art, morals, a philosophy of life without sunshine, but to which courage gives vigour. She was without bitterness; even when broken she did not revolt; she was not the rebel so many people imagine her to have been; and she was always thankful for a little joy.

In the beginning of 1853 her health began to improve; she was amazed to find that she could easily endure the winter months which the year before had crushed her; a visit from the Bishop made her happy, she began to smile; the success of *Villette* was very marked, and if the coolness between Miss Martineau and herself had not occurred at that time, her sky would have been almost clear. This change brings us to the last part of her short existence, the only two years during which life was sweet to her. But before sharing with her, poor girl, this momentary lull, a word must be said about her last novels.

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Shirley, composed under the sad conditions already described, appeared at the end of 1849. This is the subject of the book, or rather, the germ, the conception, which must always be sought when we wish to find what first led the author to write it:

A gentle and charming girl, Caroline Helstone, loves her cousin, Robert Moore, a strange boy, shifting and puzzling, whose nature while indomitable in practical affairs is timid in the presence of sentiment. He also loves Caroline, or rather, condescends to realize her charm, when another girl appears, Shirley Keeldar, of a totally different character. She is rich, proud, generous, intelligent; she is imperious and even irascible, as people with power may be, but truly noble and great. She and Robert Moore are two forces which must either attract or repel each other. They are mutually attractive, and we become spectators, along with poor mute little Caroline, of their progress towards each other.

Such is the theme of the first two volumes and part of the third; and nothing could be more frequent or more natural in everyday life. If it were not for the complicated nature of the character of Robert Moore *Shirley* might be, up to that point, a fatalistic novel by Hardy. Written by him, it would inevitably terminate tragically. Caroline Helstone, as delicate in body as in soul, would pine to death soon after the marriage of her cousin, and her death would leave an eternal shadow over the happiness of the others; or, she would recover and marry for spite a man whom she would never love; or else, Robert and Shirley after loving each other for a while would fall out, and

Robert would perceive that he had made a mistake, and here would begin an entirely different tale with infinite possibilities. But Charlotte Brontë is not Thomas Hardy. Her realism is psychological and artistic, not a conception of life. Charlotte at thirty-three is still a girl, the daughter of a clergyman and a provincial; we feel deep in her a desire for the whole truth, evident several times in phrases which are almost frank; but she is timid, and if love turned aside from marriage, her terror of facing a culpable sentiment would deprive her of the power to depict it. Things, then, must be properly arranged.

But how? Without the least doubt, Charlotte had no idea when she began her book. Like George Sand, like nearly all women, she relied on the first bubbling of her fancy, believing that what is vital and natural can never degenerate into second-rate artifice. From this method resulted the long periods when she loses sight of her subject, and is obliged to wait until a new vein restores her vigour and confidence. One always feels, moreover, that in spite of her talent, she is compelled to whip up her Pegasus, as she would say: extraordinary virtuoso though she be, we are sometimes aware of her effort.

Nowhere do we see her less convinced than she is here. The story unfolds, but goes to pieces. Shirley and Robert have never truly loved: they believed perhaps that they did, but were deceived and we also. Now appears on the scene a ludicrous personage, Louis Moore, who resembles his brother as an old defaced mirror resembles reality. He has hardly arrived before Shirley, his former pupil, becomes attached to him – at least we are told so, but it would not be in the power of any genius to make us believe

it – and it is understood that she will marry him. As for Robert, what could he do but marry Caroline? Let them all marry then, that none may be left to irritate us further, and let us close for ever this third volume that French convent girls would regard with scornful scepticism, and that even the English reader himself, grown-up child and imaginative prodigy that he is, cannot finish without a smile.

We see, then, the distance which separates *Shirley* from *Jane Eyre*, a book of such fine unity in which the inspiration, even when it sometimes turns to lyricism, grows constantly from page to page. With the exception of Caroline, all the chief characters in *Shirley* play a false rôle. Add that the absurdity of the formula for writing a novel in three volumes is strikingly evident in this one. Richardson and Fielding had only to add to their manuscript twenty letters or two more adventures to make a volume; but outside their genre, a novel drawn out longer is a novel long drawn out. Charlotte entitles one of her chapters, 'Wherein matters make some progress, but not much'; ten others might have borne the same heading. The fête at the school – for there is a school fête – Shirley's French exercise, Shirley bitten by a mad dog, and several other chapters, are nightmares.

All this being true, why is *Shirley* a famous novel, and why was it welcomed by contemporary critics? An answer to both questions might perhaps lie in the fact that in a product as limited in quantity as Charlotte Brontë's the whole singularly aids the parts, and that now as in 1850 the success of *Jane Eyre* intimidates the judgment. But it must be said also that Charlotte, always uneven, is never weak. The superb mosaic of her style charms us while we are kept

waiting, and even when she knows she is being improbable, her will to convince us is never wholly ineffective.

It must above all be remembered that the first two volumes of *Shirley* do not exhibit the unpardonable faults of the third. When they are read with a mind sufficiently fresh not to have any doubts of innocence, it is impossible not to feel the charm of these characterizations of young girls. Shirley is perhaps somewhat conventional, though Emily posed for her, and one of the names she gives her – the 'black swan' – admirably expresses our impression of both of them. She is too much the aristocratic girl imagined by a bourgeois girl with all the supposed perfections of her class and only ennobled defects. But there is much subtle human truth to be disengaged from her pretty fencing with Robert Moore. This soft bloom of sentiment, delicate and brilliant, so easily injured by the touch of the novelist, is left intact by Charlotte's sensitive hands.

Caroline is altogether exquisite, and sufficient in herself to assure the future of the novel. Apparently nothing could be more self-evident than her character. An orphan eighteen years old, reared by a morose uncle, loving as naturally as she breathed, not at all coquettish but piquant nevertheless, watching with gentle resignation the triumph of her rival, whom she loves, dying for lack of happiness, reviving when it comes – what could be more outworn, and what more venturesome an undertaking than to give life again to such a faded portrait! In this Charlotte succeeded. She believed in her Caroline. She never remembered for an instant that she was painting on the edge of an abyss. Twice she re-painted an eternal

scene: the nocturnal reverie of a sad, hopeless girl, without even the encouragement of a Saint Agnes' Eve with its expectation of a dream, and twice she knew how to invest it with penetrating poetry. Let any reader count how many genuine young girls he has met in the literature of any country!

A large part of the charm of *Shirley*, therefore, lies in its poetry, in its idealization. Nevertheless, the sensation it awakens when it suddenly recurs to our memory is often quite different, and we recall realistic scenes full of vigour. This is not due to Robert Moore, a brother to Hunsden as much as to Rochester, as bizarre as he is forceful and altogether an enigma. On the other hand, all the secondary characters are roughly and deeply etched. The Brontës – Anne as well as the rest – always liked this method, and the figures they placed at the back of their stage, those which they created the most easily and spontaneously, attaching minor importance to them, generally take on this hard relief. This was one of the reasons why delicate people found Charlotte vulgar. Kingsley, rare writer though he was, was repelled, in the first chapter of *Shirley*, by the hubbub of the curates.

These old enemies of Charlotte's reappear at intervals in the novel like a periodical and inevitable scourge. Never have hated objects been painted with so much loving care. The description of the levitical saturnalia which fills the first chapter, and which shocked so severely the sensitive taste of Kingsley, seems to us a pure masterpiece. Scarcely have we made out what the three curates are bawling as they finish their dinner, than their characters stand out with astonishing vivacity: one, a tall blustering

Irishman, another a boasting Cockney, the third a milksop, a clever egotist but without wit, paying court to the rich girls of the neighbourhood, and refusing to risk himself among the striking workmen because his mother would not like it. Every time they reappear we expect the truth about them, and are never disappointed: these strolling encyclopædias of ecclesiastic faults are never for an instant expressed in conventional satire. Charlotte treats them ferociously – one of them is turned out of the house by Shirley and we are present at the scene – but no one could carry through their execution more artistically.

There is perhaps still more art because more nuances in the portrait of the village rector, Helstone, a soldier-priest brave as a sword but a rather spiteful old fellow, sarcastic, sardonic, enemy of women because of a former unhappy marriage, and enemy also of most men. He is the uncle of poor little Caroline and forms a striking contrast to his niece.

There are other characters in the book who are perfectly alive: workmen, real striking workmen, not idealized as George Eliot would make them, but simple and real, suffering, and only moderately appealing in their blue-dyed coats. There is an intelligent and cultured manufacturer, despising conventions and speaking dialect when he feels inclined; the sister of Robert Moore, half Belgian, half English, economical and authoritative; a few country squires, dry, angular provincials whose narrow Protestantism displeases Charlotte as much as the pomp of the High Church; some decent peasants, among them a good woman, natural and charming, and all

of them truthfully, clearly visualized and drawn without the least affectation.

All this is what rises to the surface when we have not opened *Shirley* for some time, and is probably what best characterizes Charlotte's talent in this novel as well as – I am led to believe – those novels which she would have written if death had left her time to profit by her experience: she would not have been long in discovering that her lyricism and her childish formula for constructing a novel stood in the way of her most natural gift, which is a masculine sincerity, or let us say better – for men nowadays too often borrow the pens of women – a Shakespearean sincerity in expressing life.

Shirley was full of promise which was to be partly realized in *Villette*.

The reader will remember that *Villette* was the product of Charlotte's sojourn in Brussels. She had drawn from the same material her first novel, *The Professor*, which nobody wanted, and which did not appear until after her death. From 1849 to 1852 she resumed this old theme, working with great difficulty and many vexations, and the new book was published early in 1853.

Whether from ignorance of the world or a writer's egoism, there are strange sillinesses in Charlotte's composition. During three years she worked on a novel in which a man for whom she had great veneration, M. Héger, plays a rôle that is attractive, certainly, but very inferior to what he was, and in which Mme Héger, a good woman to whom Charlotte owed much, is blackened with extraordinary mastery. It never occurred to her that perhaps she was doing wrong. Had she been told so, she would

have defended herself with indignation and her habitual eloquence. At the last moment she had an understanding with Mr. Smith that no translation of the book should appear in Brussels: she failed to reflect that she herself had given English lessons to her former master, that in a few weeks the Parisian reviews would analyse her novel and set in motion all the curiosity and malice of a small capital like Brussels. No anxiety upon this point can be found in her correspondence.

What is the explanation of this mystery? It lies without doubt in the fact that Charlotte possessed two souls: one in real life where we sometimes see it rigid and exasperated, yet naturally good and caring for justice; and another literary, readily satirical and better pleased with the faults of her creations than with their virtues, in short, bitter; independent too and – witness her trouble with Miss Martineau – enduring no discussion. In several of her letters she claims emphatically the right of an author to follow exactly his own deductions from life, and nothing irritated her more than to see literal exactitude attributed to her work. Had she been reproached with a betrayal of hospitality, she would probably have replied: How do you know that I have drawn the Hégers in *Villette*? I placed my novel, it is true, in the scenes where they live; but I made Madame Beck a widow, and M. Paul a bachelor, which does not accord with the Hégers; by what right do you attribute to either of them the odium I have attached to one, or the ridicule with which I have covered the other? How do you know that I have borrowed uniquely from the Hégers the qualities I have given to Madame Beck and M. Paul? And if one insisted,

the great grey eyes would soon have lighted up, and Charlotte would have given you clearly to understand that your own wickedness appeared in your words. What reply could be given? Only that after a half-century the whole world continues to believe that M. Paul is M. Héger and Mme Beck his wife, and that it would be very difficult not to retain the impression that the latter was, in real life as well as in the novel, one of the most extraordinary types of a deceitful woman ever known.

In England *Villette* is generally considered Charlotte Brontë's masterpiece. Mr. Birrell calls it the 'dazzling' *Villette*, the 'pearl' of Miss Brontë's work, and Mrs. Humphry Ward is not less affirmative. Her introduction to *Villette* is so enthusiastic that she becomes too emphatic and ends by missing her effect. One would call it a student's rhetoric instead of the delicate direct criticism characteristic of Mrs. Ward when she gives us simply her impression as a woman of taste concerning the secrets of the author's profession. There is, however, in these strained pages a rather profound sentence:

'The narrowness of the stage on which the action passes, the foreign setting, the very fullness of poetry, of visualizing force, that runs through it, like a fiery stream bathing and kindling all it touches down to the smallest detail, are repellent or tiring to the mind that has no energy of its own responsive to the energy of the writer.'

However poorly written, this is true observation. Mrs. Humphry Ward knew very well that the reader of *Villette* must meet the author half-way. I have had occasion several times to say that the

English reader is usually admirable in this respect: as imaginative, as far from narrow literary preoccupations, as an Arab or a child. However, Mrs. Humphry Ward exacted of him a particular frame of mind in order to appreciate this novel perfectly. Her reasons are hardly convincing. Narrowness of the stage, a foreign setting, and above all a burning, penetrating sense of poetry, have never done harm to any novel.

What is lacking in *Villette*, as in *Shirley*, but which we find in *Jane Eyre*, is precisely that penetrating something which Mrs. Ward finds in *Villette* but which is really only there at intervals.

What we ask nowadays of a novel is not so much the power to make us turn the pages feverishly in order to arrive at an illuminating or revengeful *dénouement*, as to show us a passing stream of life. The human mind has become, in the last hundred years, at once positive and lyrical. The modern reader (see, for example, how such a man as Taine remained incredibly instinctive when he read for his own pleasure) wishes to be instructed and charmed at the same time. He thinks his time lost if he does not feel in what is told him something real – tragic or not – and if the artist has not known how to choose his point of view so cleverly that an emotion, powerful or dreamlike according to the nature of the tale, is disengaged every moment from the facts. The law of literary creations is verity and unity. Both are often absent from *Villette*, and the most admirable parts of the novel will never suffice to redeem this defect.

This is the story: Lucy Snow is an orphan like Jane Eyre, and like her, too, we first meet Lucy in

the house of relatives or connections more or less rich, the Brettons, mother and son, whom she visits twice a year. On one occasion she meets there a strange little girl, also a cousin of the Brettons, whom they call Missy or Polly. Eight years pass (in four lines), and when we again meet Lucy she is the companion of an aged Miss Marchmont, who dies and leaves her unprovided for. She is advised to become a teacher and go abroad. She leaves for London (where she stays at the Chapter Coffee House) and then for Brussels, which, throughout the novel, is called Villette. On the boat she meets a young English girl, Miss Ginevra Fanshawe, a brainless coquette, sparkling and selfish, a butterfly painted with poisonous colours, who is also going to Brussels-Villette. They part at Boue-Marine, that is to say Ostend, poor Lucy having lost her trunk in which she had placed her money. However, Lucy at length reaches Villette where a young man with polite manners, who proves to be English, acts as her guide when she descends from the diligence, and recommends an inn to her. She sets out to find this place, but gets lost in the dimly lighted streets and wanders about for a long time. Finally she sees in a lonely street, a sign above a door. Can this be her inn? No, it is a *pensionnat de demoiselles*, and on a plaque is the name of the directress, Madame Beck. Despair gives her courage; she rings, enters and asks for Madame Beck. The latter arrives, or rather she appears suddenly and mysteriously in the room. They talk. Lucy begs to be taken in. Madame Beck hesitates. Just then M. Paul, professor of French and cousin of the directress, passes along the hall. She calls him and submits the case to him. He puts

on his spectacles, examines for a moment the face of the stranger, and oracularly advises that she be kept. Thus Lucy Snow is housed, and in the *milieu* where nearly all the scenes of the novel are to pass.

Madame Beck the directress is a superior woman. She is not wicked. She has not much heart, though she aspires to a second marriage, but she is not cruel. She is not even hard – for instance, she does not put her assistant teachers out on the street except when it is absolutely necessary and the welfare of her house demands it. The boarding-school is well conducted and respected. Religion is highly honoured in the institution, and is incessantly supervised. Madame Beck is indefatigable. She is everywhere, day and night, treading like a cat on her 'shoes of silence,' listening at doors, looking through keyholes, emptying drawers and pockets, reading letters, and putting everything back in place with miraculous cleverness. Lucy perceives, from the day of her arrival, that she is surrounded by this invisible spying, and shows her deep scorn for what she immediately calls 'Catholic practices.' At first she is nurse for Madame Beck's three small children. That astute woman, seeing that Lucy can be useful to her in two ways, loses no time in discharging her professor of English and putting Lucy in his place. She is now on a footing of equality with teachers and pupils. Among the latter is Miss Fanshawe, whom we met on the boat. She chatters constantly, and informs Lucy that she has two lovers of whom one is named Isidore and the other M. de Hamal. She prefers M. de Hamal, but accepts presents from Isidore. During several chapters we are kept in suspense concerning the identity of the latter. At length, a fortunate circumstance

having brought to the boarding-school a young English doctor called familiarly Dr. John, Lucy discovers, first, that Dr. John is Isidore, and, secondly, that he is no other than her guide of that first evening of her arrival at Brussels. She made even a third discovery, but I have no right to disclose it now. Madame Beck is in love with this Dr. John and spares no expense to please him, but he loves Miss Fanshawe. Lucy finds him fascinating, though not handsome. Madame Beck becomes aware of this, and spies upon them. Then comes Madame Beck's birthday, and it is decided to present a play. M. Paul, the French professor, is grand manager, director, producer and prompter. He is a droll fellow, as proud as Artaban of being professor of rhetoric, as explosive as gunpowder, near-sighted, dark and choleric, but intelligent, and learned, and the best soul in the world when he is not furious. He and Lucy quarrel over examination questions, classroom discussions, and pedantic trifles which interest Lucy prodigiously. Often she braves him and puts him in a rage, but they make it up. On Madame Beck's birthday they have two terrible battles. One of the actresses falls ill and must be replaced instantly, but Lucy refuses to take her place, until M. Paul mounts his high horse. When finally she knows the rôle, a new battle begins to oblige her to forgo her British modesty and wear a man's costume. The scene is epic, and Lucy wishes to challenge one of her comrades who seems to be laughing at her. At length she gives in and achieves great success.

But the long vacation soon comes, and the poor English girl remains alone in the school. Her

struggles with loneliness end by sending her to confession (the reader will remember the scene) to an old priest who at first appears to be an excellent man, but proves later to be a Jesuit and an old rogue. A few days afterwards, unable longer to endure her solitude, she leaves the school, wanders through the streets until she is exhausted, and ends by falling unconscious to the pavement. When she regains consciousness, she finds herself in a bed surrounded by familiar objects. She believes herself in England; a woman and a young man speak to her in her own language.

Wonderful! The young man is Dr. John, the woman is his mother, and her name is Mrs. Bretton, and she is no other than Lucy's kind godmother in whose house we found her in the early chapters of the book.

When the poor teacher returns to the boarding-school after several weeks of convalescence, she is wild about Dr. John, who scarcely suspects it, although he begins to perceive certain intrigues of Miss Fanshawe's. Lucy accompanies him to the Museum, to concerts, to lectures. Everywhere they meet M. Paul, who is furious and does not hide his jealousy. Lucy becomes fashionable, and despises Belgium and the Belgians. Dr. John no longer loves Ginevra, but has only a sincere friendship for Lucy. One evening he takes the poor English girl to the theatre where Rachel is acting, and she is very happy. But the theatre takes fire, there is a panic, the crowd tramples upon people, and Dr. John saves a young girl and her old father. He takes them back to their hotel. What a surprise! The young girl is the little Missy of the first chapter, cousin of the Brettons,

and Dr. John soon falls in love with her, and she with him.

Lucy is far less unhappy than we would believe: she continues to quarrel with M. Paul, makes him for his birthday a watch-chain which she does not give him, accepts the furious scolding he gives her at his desk when she breaks his spectacles, and when, on page 490 we read this delicious sentence, '"Why were you so glad to be friends with M. Paul?" asks the reader,' we tell ourselves that we are not that honest reader.

Not more than a hundred pages remain in which to bring about the *dénouement*. Event quickly follows event. There is no doubt that M. Paul loves Lucy. Madame Beck takes steps to form a coalition with Father Silas, Lucy's confessor on one occasion but M. Paul's constant religious director. It is arranged that M. Paul shall go for three years to Guadaloupe where he has a large prospective inheritance, and marvellous watching and spying is carried on to prevent his saying *au revoir* to his little friend. But he frustrates all these plots, and not content with merely seeing Lucy before his departure, he establishes her in a little school of her own, a jewel of a school, gives her his troth, and it is very evident that when he returns they will marry.

Such is *Villette*.

Half a century ago it could have been analysed without a smile, not so to-day. It is an old novel. A contemporary novelist would accept without hesitation the same theme, even including the 'narrow and foreign stage,' but he would handle it very differently. He would make a study of a poor young girl, as unconventionally as possible, and would try to

understand the subtle reasons which made her simple and sentimental with Dr. John, coquettish and complicated with M. Paul. The background would serve as a pretext for a study of school-life, and in this phase probably nobody would approach Charlotte Brontë. The unity of the story would come from Lucy's development and her progressive blooming into happiness. All the romanticism which provokes an incredulous smile would be banished; there would be no more recognitions borrowed from Plautus; Dr. John would not play three different rôles, and he would not save in a theatre a young girl who should prove to be his cousin, a hundred pages after having saved in the street another girl who would also be his cousin; a ghost would not appear in three or four chapters, frightening us at first but afterwards making us laugh; Madame Beck could hardly make Lucy swallow a mulled egg full of opium to prevent her from going out, and Lucy, after having taken it, would not be sufficiently alert to walk all night; our curiosity would not be stimulated by letters thrown from a window; the novel would be in one volume and not three, and we would not mark time throughout whole chapters – going from museum to concert and from concert to play – simply to blacken paper; there would be little or no rhetorical writing : Happiness, Despair and Imagination would not speak as in *Pilgrim's Progress*; and there would be much less of what Mrs. Humphry Ward calls poetry.[1]

[1] She cites Lucy's nocturnal walk when she escaped from the school. There is a chapter just like it in *Jude the Obscure*. To Charlotte belongs the grand style, but it is Hardy who produces the dramatic effect.

Above all, the book would have more atmosphere and more unity. A different art would more artistically portray Lucy changing from Dr. John to M. Paul; there would be fewer interruptions, and fewer outworn methods of patching up the plot, and the chapters would be better welded together. There would also be less autobiography. Charlotte is too often led to display all her limited experience. She had seen so little, poor girl, and there is something touching in her care not to waste any of her material; but whenever she becomes autobiographical she is too much so. The story of Lucy's distress during the long vacation is exactly Charlotte's own story; but unfortunately it is not well done, it is too near the author's note-book, and the least informed reader has a confused consciousness that artistic truth is not historical truth.

We are never allowed to forget that *Villette* is a romantic novel, and it would be unbearable nowadays if Charlotte's genius had not triumphed over the very bad formula she set herself to follow. But it often triumphs. Charlotte is impassioned, she only asks to believe herself in the things she invents, and this gift, which she so fully possesses, is sufficient.

Lucy is ordinary enough, but like Jane Eyre and Caroline Helstone her aspiration towards love is sincere and convincing. Her prejudices, her pettiness, her provincialism, the affectations with which she fatigues and irritates that honest man, M. Paul, alienate our sympathy, but for all that she is no less alive. Improbable as are the vicissitudes of her romance, every time she reappears our doubts vanish. Her insufferable manœuvres as a prudish and solemn coquette, her stiffness, once or twice her

arrogance – for instance, when she speaks of the poor fat German woman, her comrade – her affected airs of a *petite bourgeoise*, her snobbishness, her independence as a Protestant without superstition, her conviction that she only, or almost only, is right and truthful – though she may be less so than she thinks – her anti-French declarations, all this angers, but all this is true.

This is owing to the fact that Charlotte herself constantly lives in Lucy, and with extraordinary sincerity. There lies her secret. Mrs. Humphry Ward has well said that nothing apparently could be more impossible than to secure a reader's interest in a school, its teachers and its scholars. *Tom Brown*, however, is a book that lasts, and when we read memoirs we are always most at ease among the hero's recollections of his childhood. The liveliness of the writer's impressions exercises sorcery over a recital otherwise commonplace. This is what happens in *Villette*. Scenes such as those between Lucy and M. Paul in which he suspects that she aspires to 'examine,' or suspects her of knowing Greek and concealing the fact, could be absolutely intolerable: and yet the reader never skips a line in *Villette*. With more worldly experience, with more literary refinement, Charlotte would have had a false shame of handling such poor subjects, and we should have lost this marvellous exaltation of the commonplace.

Besides Lucy, whom we readily imagine that Charlotte painted lovingly, there are other characters still more alive. The portraits of M. Paul, of Madame Beck, even of Ginevra Fanshawe, simple and elementary as they seem – for, at first sight, they appear monochromatic – remain for ever in the

reader's memory. They are all more or less satiric. This is one of Charlotte's most evident characteristics: her books are not good-natured; without ever being tempted to condemn the author, we cannot help remarking that her work lacks urbanity.

M. Paul, comprising in himself M. Héger and Rochester, could have been merely violent, but he is also ridiculous. To speak truly, his ridiculousness is attractive, but it sometimes suggests a pug dog, whereas Rochester evokes at least a Newfoundland. It must be admitted, however, that from the point of view of art the character of M. Paul only gains from this conception. This admixture of nobleness and basic goodness with a ferocity that goes no farther than biting, added to an intellectual capacity of the first order, makes him extraordinarily real. Ginevra is made of a substance too vaporous to be handled energetically, like M. Paul, but her delightful egoism and silliness are not tiresome.

The drawing of the character of Madame Beck I consider – contrary to English critical opinion – even superior to that of M. Paul. The final chapters in which she weaves romantic plots with Father Silas, and gives drugs to Lucy, are defective, but on the whole the character is a masterpiece. Charlotte brings her brush back to this canvas a thousand times, using indifferently the tools of Balzac or those of Saint-Simon, deepening, softening, veiling, without for one instant losing sight of her enigmatical model. The astonishing thing is that, working in that way, she succeeded, as she evidently wished to do, in not making Madame Beck profound like M. Paul. She is a clever Flemish business woman, an insincere religious devotee with the least taint of

sensuality, a hypocrite by profession rather than by nature, a woman whose strength comes from heartlessness, but her Machiavellism is on the surface, and the composition of her character is a bit thick. Charlotte has made a piece of faïence, but it has the transparence of porcelain.

What immense resources must there not have been in this girl who, having seen so little, reproduced it all so powerfully! One hour of conversation with an artist who was also a critic, as George Eliot was to reveal herself to be, would have sufficed to make her understand that she must draw her material from herself and not from her paltry experience. If we suppose *Villette* to be written entirely in the artistic vein which we find in the first chapters (little Missy), or in the sort of short story called 'Malevola,' it would be the most penetrating of novels instead of only a strong book lined with a feeble story.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

★

THERE is little to say about the last two years of Charlotte's life. Happiness came to her, but only for a moment, and this brief respite after a life that had been either arid or sad was only the prelude to her final repose. The recollections of her friends concerning this period are all coloured by this idea, and in reading them we seem to feel that they speak of a dead woman rather than a bride.

In 1851, while Charlotte was at work on *Villette*, one of her London correspondents, Mr. James Taylor, went North on business and stopped on the way at Haworth. Miss Brontë esteemed him and willingly wrote to him, but she had never suspected that this practical cold man had a sentimental attachment for her, and the following letter will show the impression which his brusque proposal of marriage made upon her:

'Could I ever feel enough for Mr. Taylor to accept of him as a husband? Friendship – gratitude – esteem – I have; but each moment he came near me, and that I could see his eyes fastened on me, my veins ran ice. Now that he is away I feel far more gentle towards him; it is only close by that I grow rigid, stiffening with a strange mixture of apprehension and anger, which nothing softens but his retreat and a perfect subduing of his manner. I did not want to be proud, nor intend to be proud, but I was forced to be so. Most true it is that we are overruled by One above us, that in His hands our very will is as clay in the hands of the potter.'

Who would believe that the writer of this letter wrote romances?

A year and a half later came another proposal of marriage. One afternoon in December, after tea, she had as usual left her father and his curate, Mr. Nicholls, together. Thinking that she heard Mr. Nicholls go out at the front door, she was surprised to hear him approach the little drawing-room where she was sitting and knock at the door.

'What his words were you can imagine; his manner you can hardly realize, nor can I forget it. He made me, for the first time, feel what it costs a man to declare affection when he doubts response. . . . The spectacle of one, ordinarily so statuelike, thus trembling, stirred and overcome, gave me a strange shock. I could only entreat him to leave me then, and promise a reply on the morrow. I asked if he had spoken to papa. He said he dared not.'

As soon as he was gone Charlotte went to tell her father what had happened. Mr. Brontë had always envisaged the possibility of his daughter's marriage with extreme aversion. He grew angry at once and began to pronounce his judgment upon Mr. Nicholls with such violence that Charlotte was appalled, and hastened to say that her decision was already made and that Mr. Nicholls should be given her refusal next day.

The consequence of this explicit declination was easily foreseen. Mr. Nicholls, who had been for eight years at Haworth, universally respected and appreciated even by Mr. Brontë, immediately sent the latter his resignation. As soon as a successor could be found, he would apply for another post.

Mr. Nicholls' successor did not arrive until May, and Charlotte had an opportunity to observe the poor man's sufferings in his association with Mr. Brontë, who, on his part, grew more and more stern, dissatisfied probably with his own conduct. Strangely enough, Charlotte's health became better; she could not remember having ever felt so well as during this winter of 1853.

We know nothing of what passed between her and Mr. Nicholls. She never saw him at the parsonage, but the house where he boarded was only distant by the length of the school, and they must often have met. In March Dr. Longley, Bishop of Ripon, coming for his pastoral visit, suspected a secret tenderness between the two. Doubtless, when later Mr. Nicholls went away, they had exchanged promises, and counted upon the future. It is possible, too, that Charlotte had taken it upon herself to influence her father to revoke his decision.

In April, 1854, she wrote Miss Wooler:

'I must tell you then that since I wrote last papa's mind has gradually come round to a view very different to that which he once took; and that after some correspondence, and as the result of a visit Mr. Nicholls paid here about a week ago, it was agreed that he was to resume the curacy of Haworth, as soon as papa's present assistant is provided with a situation, and in due course of time he is to be received as an inmate into this house. It gives me unspeakable content to see that now my father has once admitted this new view of the case he dwells on it very complacently. In all arrangements his convenience and seclusion will be scrupulously respected. Mr.

Nicholls seems deeply to feel the wish to comfort and sustain his declining years.'

A few days later she wrote to Mr. George Smith:

'I fear I must accuse myself of having formerly done Mr. Nicholls less than justice. However, he is to come back now. He has forgone many chances of preferment to return to the obscure village of Haworth. I believe I do right in marrying him. I mean to try to make him a good wife. There has been heavy anxiety, but I begin to hope all will end for the best. My expectations, however, are very subdued – very different, I dare say, to what *yours* were before you were married. Care and Fear stand so close to Hope I sometimes scarcely can see her for the shadow they cast. And yet I am thankful too, and the doubtful future must be left with Providence.'

Charlotte evidently anticipated her marriage without either enthusiasm or illusions. In this respect she resembled her own heroines who, however ardently in love they were, always became extremely calm upon the approach of their marriage. She distrusted the transports of happiness. The allusions which she makes to love in her letters might have emanated from an elderly and disillusioned woman; she believed rather in the love that develops six months after marriage. 'As to intense *passion*,' she wrote fourteen years earlier at the age of twenty-four, 'I am convinced that that is no desirable feeling. In the first place, it seldom or never meets with a requital; and, in the second place, if it did, the feeling would only be temporary; it would last the honeymoon,

and then, perhaps, give place to disgust, or indifference.'

It is certain, however, that she did not marry merely to be married. Mr. Nicholls, whom for a long time she had confused with the other curates, antipathetic or grotesque, had little by little won her esteem; and long before he proposed marriage she must have convinced herself that she had treated him unjustly. He was a man of good family, born in Ireland but of Scotch-English blood – a combination particularly approved by Charlotte – well brought up and reserved, a zealous and highly esteemed clergyman. He was one year younger than Charlotte. That fact, along with mediocre health and no fortune, had probably furnished the pretext, if not the true cause, of Mr. Brontë's opposition. In fact nobody could have been less romantic, and Charlotte's marriage harmonized in tone with what her life had always been.

She made her preparations as they are done in the country, and with visible enjoyment. They painted and freshly carpeted the old house where 'Mr. Nicholls was to live,' they prepared a study for him, Charlotte journeyed to Leeds and to Manchester to buy her trousseau, and on June 29, 1854, they were married. Charlotte had kept secret the day and the hour, which was in the morning; her friends, Ellen Nussey and Miss Wooler, only arrived the evening before, and Mr. Nicholls and his colleague who was to perform the ceremony drove from some distance to the church. No one in the village, therefore, had been notified; but as they came out of the church a large number of humble friends, who had come in haste, were grouped in the churchyard to see Miss

Brontë 'white as a snowdrop.' At the last moment aged Mr. Brontë declared that he would not leave the house, and Charlotte had an instant of anguish. The three friends carefully examined the Prayer Book and found, with inexpressible relief, that it was not imperative for the bride to be led to the altar by a man. So Miss Wooler replaced Mr. Brontë.

The wedding journey took them to Ireland, where Charlotte made the acquaintance of her husband's relatives. She does not appear to have wished to see her father's birthplace, nor such members of the Prunty family as still remained there; but she was ravished by the natural beauty of Ireland.

On their return, she divided her time between her husband and her father, and gradually accustomed herself to happiness. In her letters we see her pass rapidly from calling her husband 'Mr. Nicholls' to 'Arthur,' and soon 'my dear husband.' In October she wrote Mrs. Gaskell: 'I have a good, kind, attached husband, and every day my own attachment to him grows stronger.'

A passage in one of her letters gives the impression that Mr. Nicholls, who had loved in her the woman, not the author, did not encourage her to write. Mr. Nicholls has protested against this interpretation, adding that one evening his wife read aloud to him the first chapter of a new novel, *Emma*, which never went any further. Mr. Nicholls was a practical, active man who liked the open air and exercise, and may be better imagined taking his wife for a walk than placing white sheets of paper in her hands. The few letters which Charlotte wrote at this period are descriptions of excursions into the moors, and twice

she unfortunately notes that her feet were wet, or that they were overtaken by a storm.

She was *enceinte*, and the delicacy of her condition being accentuated by naturally weak health, she became very ill after the beginning of the new year and went to bed. At about the same time old Tabby died. Charlotte had neither appetite nor strength. During six weeks she lived almost without eating or drinking, painfully scrawling two or three notes to her friends, and sinking with alarming rapidity. Then a change came: while remaining so weak that she was sometimes delirious, she nevertheless began to eat hungrily everything offered to her. But it was too late. One day she heard her husband whispering a prayer for her recovery. 'Oh!' she said, 'I am not going to die, am I? He will not separate us, we have been so happy.'

She died on March 31, 1855, at the age of thirty-eight years and eleven months. Like the other members of her family she was buried in the church. Her epitaph now engraved on a fine copper plate, let into the flagstones, bears only her name and the dates of her birth and of her death.

Mr. Brontë survived his daughter six years. After his death Mr. Nicholls renounced his ecclesiastical duties and returned to Ireland to develop his property there. He married again in 1866, and did not die until 1906.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

★

Charlotte Bronte's reputation, or rather her renown, is nowadays at its zenith. She has thousands of readers in every class of society; editions luxurious or popular of her novels constantly appear; she is talked about in literary clubs, and her most insignificant notes are discoveries. Haworth has become a celebrated place, visited by pilgrims from all parts of the world.

Nevertheless, for some indefinable reason the poor girl does not seem triumphant in the midst of her triumph. Under the cold flagstones which cover their tombs, Emily seems more than ever to wear her expression of stoical hauteur and disdainful indifference; Anne, little saint, stands at the door, smiling and gentle; but Charlotte has retained the air of one who was vanquished, sadly resigned to a repose which came too soon.

This is because Emily asked nothing of anybody but herself; Anne, on the contrary, was filled throughout her life with thoughts of eternity; but Charlotte was continually oppressed by desires which she did not always succeed in expressing even to herself, and died after having just begun to know the happiness of which she had dreamed. In her life – as an artist as well as a woman – there always remains something unfinished, something eternally frustrated which shadows our thoughts of her.

She lacked good fortune, or if not that, strength or the capacity to smile. Consider Emily, whose existence was exactly the same as Charlotte's, but whose imagination and whose will lifted her high above commonplace contingencies. Consider George Sand, so inferior to Charlotte as a woman and often

as a writer: surely her life was neither noble nor beautiful, but she was not afraid to fight against destiny with the arms nearest to her hand, and, always pliant, she did not allow herself to be bruised. Consider that delicious Frenchwoman, Marceline Desbordes Valmore, a poet – if ever there was one – doomed to a prosaic, needy existence; a great lady by nature lost in Bohemia; a Christian for ever obliged to live like an actress; during forty years tried, tossed about and tortured; in spite of her incongruous destiny she never lost grace, a capacity to be enraptured, to hope always, to smile through her tears, which is the most lovable and without doubt the most heroic form of courage.

Such women offer resistance to ill fortune, and definitely dominate it.

For this, energy is not always necessary. George Eliot, younger by only three or four years than Charlotte Brontë, but who seems separated from her by a century owing to her command of all the resources of a culture of which the cloistered girl at Haworth had no idea, seems to owe a sort of royalty not so much to her will as to reliance on her philosophy, and to the refinements of her dilettantism. An infallible instinct led her to make the most of herself as well as of the least opportunities that came within her reach.

Charlotte is unlucky – so weak and so sincere as to be evidently defenceless. Except for her bubbling childhood, her life was limited and repressed: a humble education, humble friends, a shut-in milieu, no influence to liberate her, no revelations from her reading, not a word of that philosophy wherein George Eliot is seated as in a tower; very little artistic

pleasure – she was twenty-six years old when for the first time she heard real music and saw real painting – everything in short conspired to make her narrow and provincial. With all her strength she craved friendship and love; but the friendship she unconsciously sought was of the kind that would take her away from a situation that stifled her, the friendship of kind, intellectual people, and when this came to her it was too late. Her London correspondents were rather too much her benefactors. Mr. Nicholls' love for her came too late also: hardly was she sure of it than she was dead. She dragged herself, weary or wounded, along the road where so many others boldly go forward.

She felt this, and tried to resist it. But she was not made to resist; she had need of faith and love; the necessity for her was a vivifying Catholicism of the kind she expected to find in the confessional at Brussels; nothing was offered to her but the tremulous Protestantism of Anne or the arrogant Protestantism of Emily, and her proud though weak nature left her no choice. Had she had the gift of tears she would have our entire sympathy; as it is, she has the pity we give to the racer beaten in advance, but who desperately enters the struggle.

Even as a writer Charlotte was not fortunate. Here again consider George Eliot, who with less genius made more perfect books. She was an habitué of the most refined, the most conscious, the best-informed society. She was aware of the status of theories and schools, of the origin of contemporary taste, and whither it was tending. From the artistic point of view she occupied the privileged position of learned young people who are formed in modern

schools. She was never obliged to grope: a clairvoyant critic, she knew how to draw up an inventory of her resources, how to make up in poetry and in wide and subtle comprehension what she lacked in dramatic sense, and to adapt herself to the best tendencies of her day.

Charlotte never even suspected that art could gain anything by becoming conscious to this extent. She knew nothing about theories and problems. At Haworth she lived in company with a father whose culture was exactly like that of the year 1780. Her greatest luck was to know M. Héger: and compare this professor of rhetoric with a George Lewes. Therefore, she wrote old-fashioned novels, and when criticism warned her against employing more than worn-out machinery, it was as usual too late – she was astonished and irritated.

Her literary defects arise from the same cause as the checks she met with in life. Though possessing genius, she is often feeble, and though rarely high-minded she frequently appears little. Literary weaknesses and moral narrowness were the product of the cold Yorkshire village and not of a nature in which tenderness dominated, and which only needed sunshine.

However, a lesson and some encouragement emanate from this short imperfect life. Our century is materialistic, utilitarian and succinct, and sees shame in defeat. We hear of nothing but the duty of self-development. Thoroughly analysed, this theory signifies what more than one admits that it means: to thoroughly develop oneself means to set a value up to the last penny upon what one believes oneself to be worth, and to lose nothing of this value; it is to

consider oneself a dupe to sacrifice one's present happiness to a problematic future or to the happiness of others. This results in a sort of theology founded on the affirmation that one pleases God in pleasing oneself.

From this point of view Charlotte Brontë was foolish enough. She would have realized self-development very differently if she had left Haworth, where she stifled, and gone to expand her lungs in London, where everything encouraged her vanity. She would perhaps have lived longer there, she would have had many pleasures and many satisfactions for her pride, and surely her art would have profited by it. But what decadence! She would have been, if not at least a George Sand, a George Eliot entirely consecrated to literary production, and noting day by day the condition of her own brain. Instead of writing simple and sincere little letters to obscure authors, or publishers' representatives, she too, perhaps, would have had her salon at Chelsea and delivered oracular opinions in the midst of an admiring circle. Yes, but she would have been a woman of letters instead of the happy woman devoted to duty which she had always wished to be. And what should we gain from her elegant egoism, which we should call power? Instead of the admirable insistent sincerity which we love in her, she would have perhaps accustomed herself to play a rôle, that is to say, more or less a comedy. Instead of hearing her say that, her books once finished, she only thought of them to remember the trouble they cost her, we should have seen her talking of her art to pretentious fools seeking to derive a philosophy from it. Provincial, unfortunate, ignorant of the art

of living, sometimes bitter as we have seen her, she remains at least always simple and natural, she is a real woman and not the unnatural product of modern artificiality which the woman of letters too often is. Thus a part, the highest and finest part, of her vocation as a human being was fulfilled. She preferred to be, rather than merely to appear to be. It would have been easy for her to aggrandize herself by her talent, but she did not wish to do that. Charlotte Brontë never wished to owe anything to Currer Bell. The modern conspiracy to transform success into happiness, cleverness into virtue, and talent into heroism, would have filled her with horror. On the other hand, she would appear awkward, countrified and limited to our world of comedians. But a change will come. Some day it will be clearly seen that the talent is not the man, that inspiration is an accident, that the poem is too often superior to the poet, and that the ageing writer sees his books separate themselves farther and farther from him as if they were another man's children. Literature will be relegated to its proper place, which is secondary, as intellect has been. Men will no longer be regarded as gods who only have brilliance, and there will not be a materialistic cult for what are called their relics. When that day comes there will no longer be pilgrimages to Haworth, where the dust of the Brontës continues its dissolution, but Charlotte will appear greater for having been willing, with all her genius, to live and die humble.

Note to Chapter VIII of Les Soeurs Brontë, *written by the Author, in English, especially for this translation.*

Since this chapter was written an important event has occurred which compels me to place a query after the sentence on page 95: 'Not a word in Charlotte's correspondence permits the supposition that she was in love with her master.'

On July 29, 1913, *The Times* published four letters written by Charlotte Brontë to M. Héger during the years 1844 and 1845. These letters were a gift to the British Museum from no other person than Dr. Héger, President of the Royal Academy of Medicine in Brussels, son of Professor Héger, and they created an immense sensation which only the discovery of Wordsworth's romance with a French girl has since equalled. Here are these letters in the original French with the English translation by Marion H. Spielmann, from *The Times*: –

LETTER I

(24 *July*, 1844)

Monsieur,

Je sais bien que ce n'est pas à mon tour de vous écrire, mais puisque Mde. Wheelwright va à Bruxelles et veut bien se charger d'une lettre – il me semble que je ne dois pas négliger une occasion si favorable pour vous écrire.

Je suis très contente que l'année scolaire soit presque finie et que l'époque des vacances approche – j'en suis contente pour vous, Monsieur – car, on m'a dit que vous travaillez trop et que votre santé en est un peu alterée – C'est pourquoi je ne me permets

pas de proférer une seule plainte au sujet de votre long silence – j'aimerais mieux rester six mois sans recevoir de vos nouvelles que d'ajouter un atome de poids, déja trop lourd, qui vous accable – Je me rappelle bien que c'est maintenant l'époque des compositions, que ce sera bientôt celle des examens et puis, des prix – et pendant tout ce temps, vous êtes condamné à respirer l'atmosphère desséchante des classes – à vous user – à expliquer, à interroger, à parler toute la journée et puis le soir vous avez toutes ces malheureuses compositions à lire, à corriger, presqu'à refaire – Ah Monsieur! je vous ai écrit une fois une lettre peu raisonnable, par ce que le chagrin me serrait le coeur, mais je ne ferai plus – je tacherai de ne plus être égoïste et tout en regardant vous (*sic*, for 'vos') lettres comme un des plus grands bonheurs que je connaisse j'attendrai patiemment pour en recevoir jusqu'à ce qu'il vous plaira et vous conviendra de m'en envoyer. En même temps je puis bien vous écrire de temps en temps une petite lettre – vous m'y avez autorisée.

Je crains beaucoup d'oublier le français, car je suis bien persuadée que je vous reverrai un jour – je ne sais pas comment ni quand – mais cela doit être puisque je le désire tant, et alors je ne voudrais pas rester muette devant vous – ce serait trop triste de vous voir et de ne pas pouvoir vous parler (;) pour éviter ce malheur – j'apprends, tous les jours, une demie page de français par coeur dans un livre de style familier: et j'ai un plaisir à apprendre cette leçon – Monsieur – quand je prononce les mots français il me semble que je cause avec vous.

On vient de m'offrir une place comme première maitresse dans un grand pensionnat à Manchester,

avec un traitement de 100£ – i.e. 2,500 frs. par an – je ne puis pas l'accepter – car en l'acceptant je dois quitter mon père et cela ne se peut pas – J'ai cependant mon projet – (lorsqu'on vit dans la retraite le cerveau travaille toujours – on désire s'occuper – on veut se lancer dans une carrière active). Notre Presbytère est une maison assez grande – avec quelques changements il y aura de la place pour cinq ou six pensionnaires – si je pouvais trouver ce nombre d'enfants de bonne famille je me dévouerais a leur éducation – Emilie n'aime pas beaucoup l'instruction mais elle s'occuperait toujours du ménage, et quoiqu' (un) peu recluse, elle a trop bon coeur pour ne pas faire son possible pour le bien-être des enfants – elle est aussi tres généreuse et pour l'ordre, l'économie, l'exactitude – le travail assidu – toute(s) choses très essentielles dans un pensionnat – je m'en charge volontiers.

Voila mon projet, Monsieur, que j'ai déja expliqué à mon père et qu'il trouve bon. Il ne reste donc (the last three words almost undecipherable under the slip of repairing-paper) que de trouver des élèves – chose assez difficile – car nous demeurons assez loin des villes et on ne se soucie guère de franchir les montagnes qui nous servent de barrière – mais (la) tâche qui est sans difficulté est presque sans mérite – il y a un grand intérêt à vaincre les obstacles – Je ne dit pas que je réussirai mais je *tacherai* de réussir – le seul effort me fera du bien – il n'y a rien que je crains comme la paresse – le désoeuvrement – l'inertie – la léthargie des facultés – quand le corps est paresseux, l'esprit souffre cruellement.

Je ne connaitrais pas cette léthargie si je pouvais écrire – autrefois je passai des journées, des semaines,

des mois entiers à écrire et pas tout à fait sans fruit puisque Southey, et Coleridge – deux de nos meilleurs auteurs, à qui j'ai envoyé certains manuscrits en ont bien voulu témoigner leur approbation – mais à present j'ai la vue trop faible pour écrire – si j'écrivais beaucoup je deviendrais aveugle. Cette faiblesse de vue est pour moi une terrible privation – sans cela savez-vous ce que je ferais Monsieur? – j'écrirai un livre et je le dédierais à mon maître de littérature – au seul maître que j'ai jamais eu – à vous Monsieur. Je vous ai souvent dit en français combien je vous respecte – combien je suis redevable a votre bonté, à vos conseils, je voudrais le dire une fois en anglais – Cela ne se peut pas – il ne faut pas y penser – la carrière de lettres m'est fermée – celle de l'instruction seule m'est ouverte – elle n'offre pas les mêmes attraits – c'est égal, j'y entrerai et si je n'y vais pas loin, ce ne sera pas (par) manque de diligence. Vous aussi Monsieur – vous avez voulu être avocat – le sort ou la Providence vous à fait professeur – vous etes heureux malgré cela.

Veuillez presenter à Madame l'assurance de mon estime – je crains que Maria-Louise-Claire ne m'aient déja oubliée. Prospère et Victorine ne m'ont jamais bien connue – moi je me souviens bien de tous les cinq – surtout de Louise – elle avait tant de caractère – tant de naïveté dans sa petite figure.

Adieu Monsieur,–

Votre élève reconnaissante

C. BRONTË.

July 24.

Je ne vous ai pas prié de m'écrire bientôt, puisque je crains de vous importuner – mais vous êtes trop bon pour oublier que je le désire tout de même – oui –

je le désire beaucoup – c'est assez – après tout – faites comme vous voudrez monsieur – si, enfin je recevais une lettre et si je croyais que vous l'aviez écrite *par pitié* – cela me ferait beaucoup de mal –

Il parait que Mde Wheelwright va à Paris avant d'aller à Bruxelles – mais elle mettra ma lettre à la poste à Boulogne – encore une fois adieu Monsieur cela fait mal de dire adieu même dans une lettre – Oh c'est certain que je vous reverrai un jour – il le faut bien – puisque aussitôt que j'aurai gagné assez d'argent pour aller à Bruxelles j'y irai – et je vous reverrai si ce n'est que pour un instant.

I

(Translation taken from *The Times*)

MONSIEUR,

I am well aware that it is not my turn to write to you, but as Mrs. Wheelwright is going to Brussels and is kind enough to take charge of a letter – it appears to me that I ought not to neglect so favourable an opportunity of writing to you.

I am very pleased that the school-year is nearly over and that the holidays are approaching, – I am pleased on your account, Monsieur – for I am told that you are working too hard and that your health has suffered somewhat in consequence. For that reason I refrain from uttering a single complaint for your long silence – I would rather remain six months without receiving news from you than add one grain to the weight already too heavy – which overwhelms you. I know well that it is now the period of compositions, that it will soon be that of examinations and later on of prizes – and during all that time you are condemned to breathe the stifling atmosphere of

the class-rooms – to spend yourself – to explain, to question, to talk all day, and then in the evening you have all those wretched compositions to read, to correct, almost to re-write – Ah Monsieur! I once wrote you a letter that was less than reasonable, because sorrow was at my heart; but I shall do so no more. – I shall try to be selfish no longer; and even while I look upon your letters as one of the greatest felicities known to me I shall await the receipt of them in patience until it pleases you and suits you to send me any. Meanwhile I may well send you a little letter from time to time: – you have authorized me to do so.

I greatly fear that I shall forget French, for I am firmly convinced that I shall see you again some day – I know not how or when – but it must be, for I wish it so much, and then I should not wish to remain dumb before you – it would be too sad to see you and not be able to speak to you. To avoid such a misfortune I learn every day by heart a half page of French from a book written in familiar style: and I take pleasure in learning this lesson, Monsieur; as I pronounce the French words it seems to me as if I were chatting with you.

I have just been offered a situation as first governess in a large school in Manchester, with a salary of £100 (i.e. 2,500 francs) per annum. I cannot accept it, for in accepting it I should have to leave my father, and that I cannot do. Nevertheless, I have a plan – (when one lives retired the brain goes on working; there is the desire of occupation, the wish to embark on an active career). Our vicarage is rather a large house – with a few alterations there will be room for five or six boarders. If I could find

this number of children of good family I should devote myself to their education. Emily does not care much for teaching, but she would look after the housekeeping and, although something of a recluse, she is too good-hearted not to do all she could for the well-being of the children. Moreover she is very generous, and as for order, economy, strictness – and diligent work – all of them things very essential in a school – I willingly take that upon myself.

That, Monsieur, is my plan, which I have already explained to my father and which he approves. It only remains to find the pupils – rather a difficult thing – for we live rather far from towns and one does not greatly care about crossing the hills which form as it were a barrier around us. But the task that is without difficulty is almost without merit; there is great interest in triumphing over obstacles. I do not say I shall succeed but I shall *try* to succeed – the effort alone will do me good. There is nothing I fear so much as idleness, the want of occupation, inactivity, the lethargy of the faculties: when the body is idle the spirit suffers painfully.

I should not know this lethargy if I could write. Formerly I passed whole days and weeks and months in writing, not wholly without result, for Southey and Coleridge – two of our best authors, to whom I sent certain manuscripts – were good enough to express their approval; but now my sight is too weak to write. Were I to write much I should become blind. This weakness of sight is a terrible hindrance to me. Otherwise do you know what I should do, Monsieur? – I should write a book and I should dedicate it to my literature-master – to the only master I ever had – to you, Monsieur. I have often

told you in French how much I respect you – how much I am indebted to your goodness, to your advice; I should like to say it once in English. But that cannot be – it is not to be thought of. The career of letters is closed to me – only that of teaching is open. It does not offer the same attractions; never mind, I shall enter it and if I do not go far it will not be from want of industry. You too, Monsieur – you wished to be a barrister – destiny or Providence made you a professor; you are happy in spite of it.

Please convey to Madame the assurance of my esteem. I fear that Maria, Louise, Claire have already forgotten me. Prospère and Victorine never knew me well; I remember well all five of them, especially Louise. She had so much character – so much naïveté in her little face.

Good-bye, Monsieur,
Your grateful pupil
C. BRONTË.

July 24.

I have not begged you to write to me soon as I fear to importune you – but you are too kind to forget that I wish it all the same – yes, I wish it greatly. Enough; after all, do as you wish, Monsieur. If, then, I received a letter and if I thought you had written it *out of pity* – I should feel deeply wounded.

It seems that Mrs. Wheelwright is going to Paris before going to Brussels – but she will post my letter at Boulogne. Once more good-bye, Monsieur; it hurts to say good-bye even in a letter. Oh, it is certain that I shall see you again one day – it must be so – for as soon as I shall have earned enough money to go to Brussels I shall go there – and I shall see you again if only for a moment.

LETTER II

(24 *October*, 1844)

(Addressed on the back: –
MONSIEUR HÉGER
No. 32 Rue d'Isabelle
Bruxelles.)

MONSIEUR,

Je suis toute joyeuse ce matin – ce qui ne m'arrive pas souvent depuis deux ans – c'est parce que un Monsieur de mes connaissances va passer par Bruxelles et qu'il a offert de se charger d'une lettre pour vous – laquelle lettre il vous remettra lui-même, ou bien, sa soeur, de sorte que je serai certaine que vous l'avez reçue.

Ce n'est pas une longue lettre que je vais écrire – d'abords je n'ai pas le temps – il faut que cela parte tout de suite et ensuite je crains de vous ennuyer. Je voudrais seulement vous demander, si vous avez reçu de mes nouvelles au commencement du mois de Mai et puis au mois d'Août? Voilà six mois que j'attends une lettre de Monsieur – six mois d'attente c'est bien long, cela! Pourtant je ne me plains pas et je serai richement recompensée pour un peu de chagrin – si vous voulez maintenant écrire une lettre et la donner à ce monsieur – ou à sa soeur qui me la remettrai sans faute.

Quelque courte que soit la lettre j'en serai satisfaite – n'oubliez pas seulement de me dire comment vous vous portez Monsieur et comment Madame et les enfants se portent et les maîtresses et les élèves.

Mon père et ma soeur vous presentent leurs respects – l'infirmité de ma père augmente peu à peu – cependant il n'est pas encore tout à fait aveugle –

mes soeurs sè portent bien mais mon pauvre frère est toujours malade.

Adieu Monsieur, je compte bientôt avoir de vos nouvelles – cette idée me sourit car le souvenir de vos bontés ne s'effacera jamais de ma mémoire et tant que ce souvenir durera le respect qu'il m'a inspiré durera aussi.

Votre éleve tres dévouée

C. BRONTË.

Je viens de faire relier tous les livres que vous m'avez donnés quand j'étais a Bruxelles (;) j'ai un plaisir à les considérer – cela fait tout une petite bibliothèque – Il y a d'abord les ouvrages complets de Bernardin de St. Pierre – Les Pensées de Pascal – un livre de poësie, deux livres allemands – et (ce qui vaut tout le reste) deux discours de Monsieur le Professeur Héger – prononcés à la distribution des Prix de l'Athénée royal –

Octb. 24, 1844.

II

(Translation taken from *The Times*)

MONSIEUR,

I am in high glee this morning – and that has rarely happened to me these last two years. It is because a gentleman of my acquaintance is going to Brussels and has offered to take charge of a letter for you – which letter he will deliver to you himself, or else his sister, so that I shall be certain that you have received it.

I am not going to write a long letter; in the first place I have not the time – it must leave at once; and then, I am afraid of worrying you. I would only ask

of you if you heard from me at the beginning of May and again in the month of August? For six months I have been awaiting a letter from Monsieur – six months' waiting is very long, you know! However, I do not complain and I shall be richly rewarded for a little sorrow if you will now write a letter and give it to this gentleman – or to his sister – who will hand it to me without fail.

I shall be satisfied with the letter however brief it be – only do not forget to tell me of your health, Monsieur, and how Madame and the children are, and the governesses and pupils.

My father and my sister send you their respects. My father's infirmity increases little by little. Nevertheless, he is not yet entirely blind. My sisters are well, but my poor brother is still ill.

Farewell, Monsieur; I am depending on soon having your news. The idea delights me, for the remembrance of your kindnesses will never fade from my memory, and as long as that remembrance endures the respect with which it has inspired me will endure likewise.

Your very devoted pupil

C. BRONTË.

I have just had bound all the books you gave me when I was at Brussels. I take delight in contemplating them; they make quite a little library. To begin with, there are the complete works of Bernardin de St. Pierre – the Pensées de Pascal – a book of poetry, two German books – and (worth all the rest), two discourses of Monsieur le Professeur Héger delivered at the distribution of prizes of the Athénée Royal.

Octb. 24, 1844.

LETTER III

(8 *January*, 1845)

(Addressed on the back: –
MONSIEUR HÉGER
No. 32 Rue d'Isabelle
Bruxelles
Belgique.)

Mr. Taylor est revenue, je lui ai demandé s'il n'avait pas une lettre pour moi – 'Non, rien. ' Patience' – dis-je – 'sa soeur viendra bientôt' – Mademoiselle Taylor est revenue 'Je n'ai rien pour vous de la part de Monsieur Héger' dit-elle 'ni lettre ni message.'

Ayant bien compris ces mots – je me suis dit, ce que je dirais à un autre en pareille circonstance. 'Il faut vous résigner et, surtout, ne pas vous affliger d'un malheur que vous n'avez pas merité. Je me suis efforcée à ne pas pleurer à ne pas me plaindre –

Mais quand on ne se plaint pas et qu'on veut se dominer en tyran – les facultés se revoltent – et on paie le calme extérieur par une lutte intérieure presque insupportable(.)

Jour et nuit je ne trouve ni repos ni paix – si je dors je fais des rêves tourmentants ou je vous vois toujours sévère, toujours sombre et irrité contre moi –

Pardonnez-moi donc Monsieur si je prends la partie de vous écrire encore – Comment puis-je supporter la vie si je ne fais pas un effort pour en alléger les souffrances?

Je sais que vous serez impatienté quand vous lirez cette lettre – Vous direz encore que je suis exaltée – que j'ai des pensées noires &c. Soit Monsieur – je

ne cherche pas à me justifier, je me soumets à toutes sortes de reproches – tout ce que je sais – c'est que je ne puis pas – que je ne veux pas me résigner à perdre entièrement l'amitié de mon maître – j'aime mieux subir les plus grandes douleurs physiques que d'avoir toujours le coeur lacéré par des regrets cuisants. Si mon maître me retire entièrement son amitié je serai tout à fait sans espoir – s'il en donne un peu – très peu – je serai contente – heureuse, j'aurai un motif pour vivre – pour travailler.

Monsieur, les pauvres n'ont pas besoin de grand' chose pour vivre – ils ne demandent que les miettes de pain – ils meurent de faim – Moi non plus je n'ai pas besoin de beaucoup d'affection de la part de ceux que j'aime je ne saurais que faire d'une amitié entière et complète – je n'y suis pas habituée – mais vous me témoigniez autrefois *un peu* d'intérêt quand j'étais votre élève à Bruxelles – et je tiens à conserver ce *peu* d'intérêt – j'y tiens comme je tiendrais à la vie.

Vous me direz peutêtre – je ne vous porte plus le moindre intérêt Mademoiselle Charlotte – vous n'êtes plus de ma maison – je vous ai oubliée.

Eh bien Monsieur dites moi cela franchement – ce sera pour moi un choc – n'importe ce sera toujours moins hideux que l'incertitude.

Je ne veux pas relire cette lettre – je l'envoie comme je l'ai écrite – Pourtant, j'ai comme la conscience obscure qu'il y a des personnes froides et sensées qui diraient en la lisant – 'elle déraisonne' – Pour toute vengeance – je souhaite à ces personnes – un seul jour des tourments [que – a portion of paper is covered by a fragment torn from another part] j'ai subis depuis huit mois – on verrait alors s'elles (ne) déraisonneraient pas de même.

On souffre en silence tant qu'on a la force et quand cette force manque on parle sans trop mesurer ses paroles.

(*Two lines here erased by C.B.*)

Je souhaite à Monsieur le bonheur et la prosperité.

Jany. 8, Haworth – Bradford – Yorkshire.

III

(Translation taken from *The Times*)

Mr. Taylor has returned I asked him if he had a letter for me. 'No; nothing.' 'Patience,' said I – 'his sister will be here soon.' Miss Taylor has returned. 'I have nothing for you from Monsieur Héger,' says she; 'neither letter nor message.'

Having realized the meaning of these words, I said to myself what I should say to another similarly placed: 'You must be resigned, and above all do not grieve at a misfortune which you have not deserved.' I strove to restrain my tears, to utter no complaint.

But when one does not complain, when one seeks to dominate oneself with a tyrant's grip, the faculties start into rebellion and one pays for external calm with an internal struggle that is almost unbearable.

Day and night I find neither rest nor peace. If I sleep I am disturbed by tormenting dreams in which I see you, always severe, always grave, always incensed against me.

Forgive me then, Monsieur, if I adopt the course of writing to you again. How can I endure life if I make no effort to ease its sufferings?

I know that you will be irritated when you read this letter. You will say once more that I am hysterical [or neurotic] – that I have black thoughts,

&c. So be it, Monsieur; I do not seek to justify myself; I submit to every sort of reproach. All I know is, that I cannot, that I will not, resign myself to lose wholly the friendship of my master. I would rather suffer the greatest physical pain than always have my heart lacerated by smarting regrets. If my master withdraws his friendship from me entirely I shall be altogether without hope: if he gives me a little – just a little – I shall be satisfied – happy; I shall have a reason for living on, for working.

Monsieur, the poor have not need of much to sustain them – they ask only for the crumbs that fall from the rich men's table. But if they are refused the crumbs they die of hunger. Nor do I, either, need much affection from those I love. I should not know what to do with a friendship entire and complete – I am not used to it. But you showed me of yore a *little* interest, when I was your pupil in Brussels, and I hold on to the maintenance of that *little* interest – I hold on to it as I would hold on to life.

You will tell me perhaps – 'I take not the slightest interest in you, Mademoiselle Charlotte. You are no longer an inmate of my House; I have forgotten you.'

Well, Monsieur, tell me so frankly. It will be a shock to me. It matters not. It would be less dreadful than uncertainty.

I shall not re-read this letter. I send it as I have written it. Nevertheless, I have a hidden consciousness that some people, cold and common sense [*sic*], in reading it would say – 'She is talking nonsense.' I would avenge myself on such persons in no other way than by wishing them one single day of the torments which I have suffered for eight months.

We should then see if they would not talk nonsense too.

One suffers in silence so long as one has the strength so to do, and when that strength gives out one speaks without too carefully measuring one's words.

I wish Monsieur happiness and prosperity.

C. B.

Jany. 8, Haworth. Bradford. Yorkshire.

LETTER IV

(18 *Novr.* (?1845))

MONSIEUR,

Les six mois de silence sont écoulés; nous sommes aujourd'hui au 18 Novbre, ma dernière lettre était datée (je crois) le 18 Mai, je puis donc vous écrire, sans manquer a ma promesse.

L'été et l'automne m'ont paru bien longs; à vrai dire il m'a fallu des efforts pénible pour supporter jusqu'à présent la privation que je me suis imposée: vous ne pouvez pas concevoir cela, vous, Monsieur, mais imaginez vous, pour un instant, qu'un de vos enfants est séparé de vous de 160 lieues de distance et que vous devez rester six mois sans lui écrire, sans recevoir de ses nouvelles, sans en entendre parler, sans savoir comment il se porte, alors vous comprendrez facilement tout ce qu'il y a de dure dans une pareille obligation. Je vous dirai franchement, qu'en attendant, j'ai taché de vous oublier, car le souvenir d'une personne que l'on croit ne devoir plus revoir et que, pourtant, on estime beaucoup, harasse trop l'esprit et quand on a subi cette espèce d'inquiètude pendant un ou deux ans, on est prêt à tout faire pour retrouver le repos. J'ai tout fait, j'ai cherché les

occupations, je me suis interdit absolument le plaisir de parler de vous – même à Emilie mais je nai pu vaincre ni mes regrets ni mon impatience – c'est humiliant cela – de ne pas savoir maîtriser ses propres pensées, être esclave à un regret, un souvenir, esclave à une idée dominante et fixe qui tyrannise son esprit. Que ne puis-je avoir pour vous juste autant d'amitié que vous avez pour moi – ni plus ni moins? Je serai alors si tranquille, si libre – je pourrais garder le silence pendant six ans sans effort.

Mon père se porte bien mais sa vue est presque éteinte, il ne sait plus ni lire ni écrire; c'est, pourtant, l'avis des médecins d'attendre encore quelques mois avant de tenter une opération – l'hiver ne sera pour lui qu'une longue nuit – il se plaint rarement, j'admire sa patience – Si la Providence me destine la même calamité – puisse-t-elle au moins m'accorder autant de patience pour la supporter! Il me semble, monsieur, que ce qu'il y a de plus amère dans les grands malheurs physiques c'est d'être forcé à faire partager nos souffrances à tout ceux qui nous entourent; on peut cacher les maladies de l'âme mais celles qui attaquent le corps et détruisent les facultés, ne se cachent pas. Mon père me permet maintenant de lui lire et d'écrire pour lui, il me témoigne aussi plus de confiance qu'il ne m'en a jamais témoignée, ce qui est une grande consolation.

Monsieur, j'ai une grâce a vous demander: quand vous répondrez a cette lettre, parlez-moi un peu de vous-même pas de moi (,) car, je sais, que si vous me parlez de moi ce sera pour me gronder et, cette fois, je voudrais voir votre côté bienveillant; parlez-moi donc de vos enfants; jamais vous n'aviez le front sévère quand Louise et Claire et Prospère étaient

près de vous. Dîtes-moi aussi quelque chose du Pensionnat, des élèves, des Maîtresses – Mesdemoiselles Blanche, Sophie et Justine restent-elles toujours à Bruxelles? Dîtes-moi ou vous avez voyagé pendant les vacances – n'avez-vous pas été sur les bords du Rhin? N'avez-vous pas visité Cologne ou Coblentz? Dîtes-moi enfin ce que vous voulez mon maître mais dîtes-moi quelque chose. Ecrire à une ci-devant sous-maîtresse (non – je ne veux pas me souvenir de mon emploi de sous-maîtresse je le renie) mais enfin, écrire à une ancienne élève ne peut être une occupation fort intéressante pour vous – je le sais – mais pour moi c'est la vie. Votre dernière lettre m'a servi de soutiens – de nourriture pendant six mois – à present il m'en faut une autre et vous me le donnerez – pas parce que vous avez pour moi de l'amitié – vous ne pouvez en avoir beaucoup – mais parce que vous avez l'âme compatissante et que vous ne condamneriez personne à de longues souffrance pour vous épargner quelques moments d'ennui. Me défendre a vous écrire, refuser de me répondre ce sera de m'arracher la seule joie que j'ai au monde, me priver de mon dernier privilège – privilège auquel je ne consentirai jamais à renoncer volontairement. Croyez-moi mon maître, en m'écrivant vous faites un bon oeuvre – tant que je vous crois assez content de moi, tant que j'ai l'espoir de recevoir de vos nouvelles je puis être tranquille et pas trop triste mais quand un silence morne et prolongé semble m'avertir de l'éloignement de mon maître à mon égard – quand de jour en jour j'attends une lettre et que de jour en jour le désappointement vient me rejeter dans un douleureux accablement et que cette douce joie de voir votre écriture, de lire vos conseils me fuit comme

une vaine vision, alors, j'ai la fièvre – je perds l'appétit et le sommeil – je déperis.

Puis-je vous écrire encore au mois de Mai prochain? J'aurai voulu attendre une année – mais c'est impossible – c'est trop long.

C. BRONTË.

I must say one word to you in English – I wish I could write to you more cheerful letters, for when I read this over, I find it to be somewhat gloomy – but forgive me, my dear master – do not be irritated at my sadness – according to the words of the Bible: 'Out of the fulness of the heart, the mouth speaketh' and truly I find it difficult to be cheerful so long as I think I shall never see you more. You will perceive by the defects in this letter that I am forgetting the French language – yet I read all the French books I can get and learn daily a portion by heart – but I have never heard French spoken but once since I left Brussels – and then it sounded like music in my ears – every word was most precious to me because it reminded me of you – I love French for your sake with all my heart and soul.

Farewell my dear Master – may God protect you with special care and crown you with peculiar blessings.

C. B.

Nov. 18.
Haworth.
Bradford. Yorkshire.

(It is on the edge of this letter that Professor Héger made some commonplace notes in pencil – one of them the name and address of a shoemaker.)

IV

(Translation taken from *The Times*)

MONSIEUR,

The six months of silence have run their course. It is now the 18th of Novr.; my last letter was dated (I think) the 18th of May. I may therefore write to you without failing in my promise.

The summer and autumn seemed very long to me; truth to tell, it has needed painful efforts on my part to bear hitherto the self-denial which I have imposed on myself. You, Monsieur, you cannot conceive what it means; but suppose for a moment that one of your children was separated from you, 160 leagues away, and that you had to remain six months without writing to him, without receiving news of him, without hearing him spoken of, without knowing aught of his health, then you would understand easily all the harshness of such an obligation. I tell you frankly that I have tried meanwhile to forget you, for the remembrance of a person whom one thinks never to see again and whom, nevertheless, one greatly esteems, frets too much the mind; and when one has suffered that kind of anxiety for a year or two, one is ready to do anything to find peace once more. I have done everything; I have sought occupations; I have denied myself absolutely the pleasure of speaking about you – even to Emily; but I have been able to conquer neither my regrets nor my impatience. That, indeed, is humiliating – to be unable to control one's own thoughts, to be the slave of a regret, of a memory, the slave of a fixed and dominant idea which lords it over the mind. Why cannot I have just as much friendship for you as you

for me – neither more nor less? Then should I be so tranquil, so free – I could keep silence then for ten [*sic*] years without an effort.

My father is well but his sight is almost gone. He can neither read nor write. Yet the doctors advise waiting a few months more before attempting an operation. The winter will be a long night for him. He rarely complains; I admire his patience. If Providence wills the same calamity for me, may He at least vouchsafe me as much patience with which to bear it! It seems to me, Monsieur, that there is nothing more galling in great physical misfortunes than to be compelled to make all those about us share in our suffering. The ills of the soul one can hide, but those which attack the body and destroy the faculties cannot be concealed. My father allows me now to read to him and write for him; he shows me, too, more confidence than he has ever shown before, and that is a great consolation.

Monsieur, I have a favour to ask of you: when you reply to this letter speak to me a little of yourself, not of me; for I know that if you speak of me it will be to scold me, and this time I would see your kindly side. Speak to me therefore of your children. Never was your brow severe when Louise and Claire and Prosper were by your side. Tell me something also, of the School, of the pupils, of the Governesses. Are Mesdemoiselles Blanche, Sophie and Justine still at Brussels? Tell me where you travelled during the holidays – did you go to the Rhine? Did you not visit Cologne or Coblentz? Tell me, in short, *mon maître*, what you will, but tell me something. To write to an ex-assistant-governess (No! I refuse to remember my employment as assistant-governess – I

repudiate it) – anyhow, to write to an old pupil cannot be a very interesting occupation for you, I know; but for me it is life. Your last letter was stay and prop to me – nourishment to me for half a year. Now I need another and you will give it me; not because you bear me friendship – you cannot have much – but because you are compassionate of soul and you would condemn no one to prolonged suffering to save yourself a few moments' trouble. To forbid me to write to you, to refuse to answer me, would be to tear from me my only joy on earth, to deprive me of my last privilege – a privilege I never shall consent willingly to surrender. Believe me, *mon maître*, in writing to me it is a good deed that you will do. So long as I believe you are pleased with me, so long as I have hope of receiving news from you, I can be at rest and not too sad. But when a prolonged and gloomy silence seems to threaten me with the estrangement of my master – when day by day I await a letter and when day by day disappointment comes to fling me back into overwhelming sorrow, and the sweet delight of seeing your handwriting and reading your counsel escapes me as a vision that is vain, then fever claims me – I lose appetite and sleep – I pine away.

May I write to you again next May? I would rather wait a year, but it is impossible – it is too long.

C. BRONTË.

(Then follows the postscript in English, printed above.)

It is unnecessary to dwell on the pathos of these letters, which have no parallel not only in the rest of

Charlotte's correspondence but in anything she ever wrote. These humble supplications of a woman of genius to a man in every way – except poise – her inferior, are heart-rending; and yet, nobody who will weigh the difficulties which this correspondence was creating for M. Héger will blame him except in one detail: we wish with our whole soul he had not scribbled a bootmaker's address on a corner of the last letter: pure flame of this kind should awe even if it is not to be felt. But Flemish stolidity does not care for nuances. An admirable husband, an excellent teacher, M. Héger had no romance in him, and M. Paul is a creation of genius.

Several important problems are raised by these letters which unfortunately are not easy to solve.

1. Why were these letters not published sooner? Madame Héger's sole defence against Charlotte's cruel description of her in *Villette* had been that the author of the novel had been writing to her husband in a tone which had to be rebuked. The proof of this assertion lay in the house in the rue d'Isabelle all the time and yet it was not produced. The letters were found partly torn up, and it is probable that M. Héger, after showing them to his wife, thought of destroying them but stopped half-way in the process of doing so. But why did he not insist on Mrs. Gaskell's publishing them all, and why did Madame Héger's children wait sixty years before making them public? There is unquestionable evidence that Mrs. Gaskell saw them, or parts of them, but she only used extensively the one I quote on page 106, and was satisfied with merely reproducing a few garbled bits from another. She may have had the same scruples concerning her heroine that Bishop

Wordsworth felt with regard to the French romance of his illustrious uncle. Biographers are easily in danger of seeming indelicate when they make up their minds to be sincere too soon. And as for the Héger family, they have throughout acted with a discretion we ought to admire.

2. How did the correspondence between Charlotte and M. Héger come to an end? The explanation given by Madame Héger was that Miss Brontë, who to her was 'Miss' and nothing else, was invited to modify her tone in writing to her husband and took the hint amiss. Miss Lætitia Wheelwright says, on the contrary, that Monsieur Héger suggested that Charlotte should direct her letters to the Athénée round the corner, but offended his correspondent by doing so. It is possible that both explanations are true. The correspondence itself demonstrates that Monsieur Héger found no pleasure in it and, even at the risk of hurting Charlotte, insisted on many months elapsing before she wrote again, or kept her long waiting for brief replies. The additional precaution of suggesting the Athénée as an address may have only been a gentle reminder of the fact that his wife saw all the letters and did not like their tone. It is not impossible that Madame Héger herself thought of this oblique little dodge, which she felt would be effective. In any event, it is against all likelihood that M. Héger wanted to carry on the correspondence clandestinely.

3. If Monsieur Héger was not, however remotely, sentimentally interested in Charlotte, is it true that Charlotte was not sentimentally interested in Monsieur Héger? The answer to this question is evidently what matters the most, but it would seem

from the diversity of opinions that it is not easy to word it in a way satisfactory to all.

Mr. Clement Shorter expressed himself in *The Times* of July 30, 1913, as follows:

'I have always held the view that those letters were actuated only by the immense enthusiasm of a woman desiring comradeship and sympathy with a man of the character of Professor Héger. There was no sort of great sorrow on her part because Professor Héger was a married man, and it is plain in her letters that she merely desired comradeship with a great man. When Charlotte Brontë made her name famous with her best-known novel, she experienced much the same adulation from admirers of both sexes as she had already poured upon her teacher. She found that literary comradeship she desired in half a dozen male correspondents to whom she addressed letters in every way as interesting as those written by her to Professor Héger. There is nothing in those letters of hers, published now for the first time, that any enthusiastic woman might not write to a man double her age, who was a married man with a family, and who had been her teacher.'

Mr. W. Robertson Nicoll also wrote, in the same issue of *The Times*, a 'Vindication' of Charlotte Brontë which has to be read very carefully as it is not so clear as it superficially appears to be. The following is the most important passage:

'They (the letters) confirm the views of those among us who have steadily argued that the decisive event in Miss Brontë's life was her meeting with Monsieur Héger. No English writer has been base

enough to suggest any scandalous interpretation of this friendship, but it has been very seriously and ably argued that Miss Brontë's regard for Monsieur Héger was nothing more than an ordinary friendship. To suppose that it went further is 'pitiful and silly.' Charlotte Brontë had a genius for friendship, a passionate affection for Ellen Nussey, of whom she writes with a lover's ardour and impatience. It will now be seen that those were right who took another view. They did not forget that Charlotte Brontë was absolutely obedient to conscience, and passed stainless through all her experience. To recognize the line which divides friendship from some warmer feeling for which the word 'love' is but a vague and confusing description is not within every one's power, and a mistake in this direction is not necessarily a sin. The story, as we can now read it, is a story which, so far from being discreditable to Charlotte Brontë, commands for her the deepest reverence and sympathy. As you have most admirably said, to discuss the emotions which she has so innocently laid bare one needs a purity of thought and language equal to her own.'

Finally, Marion H. Spielman, in *The Times* of July 29, 1913, gave this involved verdict:

'There can be no question here of "unrequited love" in the ordinary acceptation of the words, but, besides a warm display of gratitude and respect, of a rather despairing friendship and a devotion, all-absorbing and passionate to an extraordinary degree, in high revolt against undeserved unappreciation, against a cold and half-grudging, if entirely proper acknowledgment which at the last goes little if

at all beyond professorial interest, now fast fading away.'

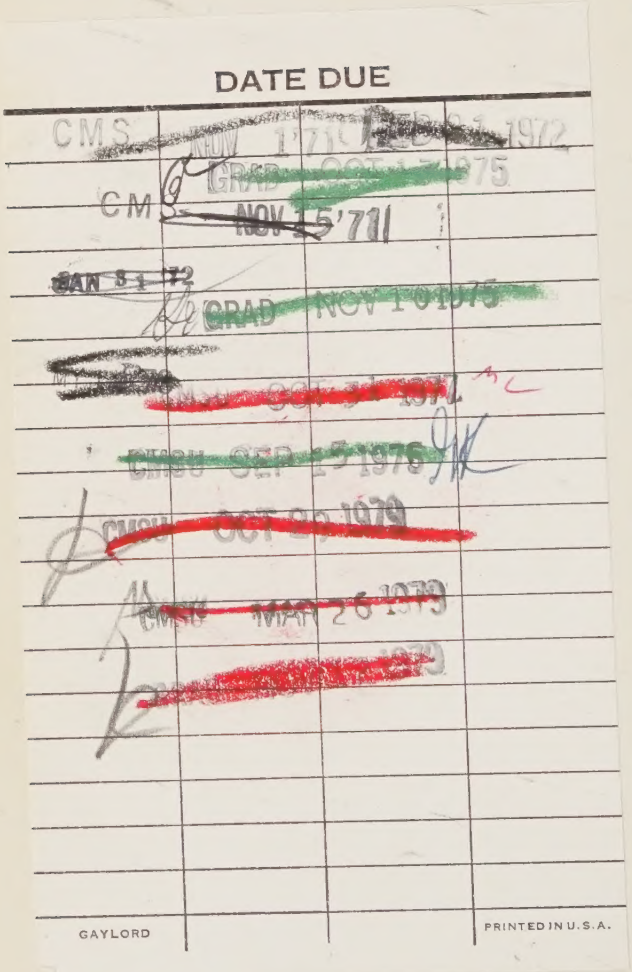
In the same article this critic says: 'It has been left only to foreign writers to see evil where evil there was none.'

From the above quotations it would appear that criticism on the subject falls under two divisions: (*a*) British critics, (*b*) foreign writers. As I am unavoidably in danger of being regarded as a foreign writer, I am anxious to point out that only one critic – an American reviewer of no mean talent but who evidently did not always read the volumes she censured – accused me of saying in true French manner, that Charlotte was in love with her professor. Had I known the four letters at the time I was writing I might, like *The Times* critic, have diagnosed in them 'despairing friendship and a devotion all absorbing and passionate to an extraordinary degree,' but I should have distinguished myself from the remainder of foreign critics by not inferring that Charlotte was actually in love with Monsieur Héger. What is love? and what is it to be in love? Divergency in the answers to these simple questions is apparently apt to make people cross and prove that the questions are not simple. The interest in one person which leads so many people to marriage is constantly and unchallengeably called love by people who refuse the name to 'devotion all-absorbing and passionate to an extraordinary degree.' Racial elements evidently intervene where philosophy ought to reign supreme. So I shall leave this question, which ought no longer to be irritating but evidently is still so, merely stating my conviction, first, that

Charlotte never asked herself if she was or was not in love with Monsieur Héger, and second, that had the latter seemed inclined to show, in his turn, anything like 'devotion all-absorbing and passionate to an extraordinary degree,' she would have promptly silenced him. There was no divorce in Belgium in those days, and had there been, Charlotte Brontë would not for one instant have considered the possibility.

On the other hand, it is misleading to dismiss the case, as *The Times* does in its editorial alongside the letters, by saying that 'As every one knows, many girls fall innocently in love with their teachers.' Charlotte Brontë was no school girl but a woman of twenty-eight when she wrote these letters, and her soul was the soul out of which *Jane Eyre* was soon to be evolved.

Everything is said when it is recalled that, as everybody agrees, Charlotte Brontë was as pure as she was impassioned.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